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Edited by
Elisabeth Angel-Perez and Aloysia Rousseau

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Elisabeth Angel-Perez and Aloysia Rousseau

Introduction: “Are We Not Over That?”

“I never think of myself as a girl writer. Just a writer. Are we not over that?” As suggested by Polly Stenham in a 2010 BBC Radio 4 – Front Row episode, we should indeed be over such gendered perception of playwriting. In fact, all the female playwrights interviewed by journalist Kirsty Lang on that programme – Alia Bano, Ella Hickson, Lucy Kirkwood, Chloe Moss, Lucy Prebble, and Polly Stenham – argued that gender had nothing to do with how or why they wrote their plays, all the while acknowledging that the debate was not dead yet. In other words, saying that we should not have to be talking about women playwrights as women playwrights doesn’t mean that we do not still need to.

Even though progress has been made these past years in terms of women’s representation in the theatre and gender pay gap, there is still room for improvement. As underlined by Eleanor Stewart in the present volume, it was not until 2008 that an original play by a woman – Rebecca Lenkiewicz’s *Her Naked Skin* – was produced on the National Theatre’s Olivier stage, and not until 2010 that the Globe Theatre produced a play by a female playwright – Nell Leyshon’s *Bedlam*. In 2015, the Guardian theatre critic Michael Billington published *The 101 Greatest Plays: From Antiquity to the Present* which featured only six female playwrights – Caryl Churchill being the only living one. A number of artistic directors have attempted to redress the balance these past years, as can be seen in the Royal Court’s 2022–2023 season: among the seven plays programmed, three are by cisgender men (Martin Crimp, Jonathan Freedland and Danny Lee Wynter), three by cisgender women (Rabiah Hussain, Jasmine Naziha Jones and Ava Wong Davies) and one by non-binary trans performer Travis Alabanza. However, it may be worth remembering that Royal Court artistic director Vicky Featherstone has been named Gender Equality Champion at the WOW Women in Creative Industries Awards in 2018 and remains largely unequalled in her attempts to take into account gender discriminations. More often than not, gender equality is merely theoretical in what is still a male-dominated industry. In the 2020 “Women in Theatre Forum Report”,¹ Research and Literary Director at Sphinx Theatre Jennifer Tucket notes that women are still blatantly underrepresented in the theatre and that gender inequality is likely to increase if government policies and arts

¹ The forum was founded by the Arts Council England and is A Sphinx Theatre/University Women in the Arts/December Group initiative in partnership with The Writers’ Guild of Great Britain, Equity, ERA 50:50, Black Womxn in Theatre and Stage Directors UK.

organisations – and more particularly the Arts Council – do not take action. The future isn't as bright as Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge had hoped for in the introduction to their 1997 book *Rage and Reason. Women Playwrights on Playwriting* when stating that “women are increasingly moving into key positions as literary managers, agents, producers, directors and artistic directors” (xx). After all, a “female artistic director assum[ing] the helm of the National [Theatre]” is, as we write these lines, still a product of Bernardine Evaristo's imagination in her 2019 book *Girl, Woman, Other* (2).

Unconscious gender bias is moreover still very much present in the theatre industry, impacting the way plays written by women are perceived. As underlined by Lucy Kirkwood in the present volume, “there remains a cultural bias towards the work of male playwrights”. Women are expected to write more intimate, emotional plays while men supposedly excel at addressing a broader range of subjects and creating epic drama, a divide Lucy Prebble's *Enron* (2009), Lucy Kirkwood's *Chimerica* (2013) and Ella Hickson's *Oil* (2016), to mention but a few, have certainly proven wrong.

This volume was born from our wish to address such gender bias and to give pride of place to a number of powerfully innovative female voices. It was also born from our wondering whether there exists such a thing as feminine aesthetics. When drafting our call for papers for the 2020 international conference on the New Wave of British Women Playwrights,² we decided not to give a specific orientation to the symposium apart from its being dedicated to this new wave of highly gifted and prolific female playwrights. Our intuition was that these women playwrights transcended gender categorization but we decided to wait and see what came out of our call for papers. The many fascinating contributions to the conference and to the present volume confirmed our intuition. The plays under scrutiny are indeed characterized by their constant creativity and exceed any categorization, merging naturalist aesthetics and formal experimentations as well as intimate and global preoccupations.

Resisting an artificial distinction between male and female playwriting, the present volume celebrates the vitality and inventiveness of highly varied voices, from internationally acclaimed playwrights to less established authors. Thanks to a previous generation of women playwrights – such as Caryl Churchill, Sarah Daniels, Timberlake Wertenbaker or Winsome Pinnock, to quote but a few – who have paved the way for them, these younger playwrights now feel en-

² The conference was organised by Elisabeth Angel-Perez, Solange Ayache and Aloysia Rousseau with the support of Sorbonne University, VALE and Initiative Théâtre and held online on 11 December 2020.

titled to tackle various subject matters and choose whatever form they want, as phrased by Laura Wade in a 2012 *Telegraph* article:

We are able to have the confidence to write about whatever we want, and there's no reason why the work we produce shouldn't be any less epic or political or brutal or beautiful than the stuff male writers produce. For most of us in our working lives, [being a woman] doesn't even feel like an issue, and that's probably because of a debt to feminist writers in decades past who had to fight a lot harder to have their voices heard. We are coming into a world where the door is absolutely open. (Auld)

The door is not as open as Wade suggests here with what can be deemed excessive optimism and universality. The glass ceiling still exists for a number of women playwrights and particularly for ethnic minority women. Winsome Pinnock was the first Black British woman to have a play, *Leave Taking*, performed at the National Theatre in 1987. Other plays by Pinnock were staged at the National Theatre in the years that followed but it would take almost twenty years for a play by another Black British woman, debbie tucker green's *generation*, to be produced there. As pointed out by the character of Amma in Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*, the opening of doors is a slow and exhausting process, in particular for Black women playwrights like her:

Amma then spent decades on the fringe, a renegade lobbing hand grenades at the establishment that excluded her

until the mainstream began to absorb what was once radical and she found herself hopeful of joining it (Evaristo 2)

If Wade's quote tends to erase intersectional perspectives, it does however rightly point to the significantly greater degree of aesthetic freedom that characterizes this young generation. Today's women playwrights can reject realism or adopt realist conventions and therefore renew the genre. There is indeed "room for realism", as suggested by Elaine Aston and analysed by Jeanne Schaaf in her chapter: "Overall, the more fluid applications of realism [...] reflect a shift away from those conservatively formed, phallogocentric uses of the genre that were previously the object of feminist criticism, opening up realist conventions to humancentric ends" (Aston, "Room for Realism" 32). Naturalism, once belonging to the bygone era of triumphant patriarchy and deemed incompatible with feminism because of the negative teleology it constructs for women, can start being an option again.³

³ Using the example of Hedda Gabler, Kim Solga shows that the arc of the character is contained in the dramaturgical structure of the play and argues that "[f]or this reason – its arc of predictability – Naturalism has [also] long made feminist theatre scholars uneasy" (Rebellato

Although not exhaustive, this collection features a wide range of female voices from debbie tucker green's *random* (2008) and Alecky Blythe's *The Girlfriend Experience* (2008) to Lucy Kirkwood's *Maryland* (2021). It comprises radically feminist plays and approaches – such as Ellie Kendrick's *Hole* (2018) – as well as plays which transcend these questions, such as Debris Stevenson's *Poet in Da Corner* which, as we are reminded by Lianna Mark in the present volume, has “perhaps less to do with gender in the absolute than with differentials of power and privilege, consequent access to the cultural markets, and the possibility within them of ‘speaking for oneself’”. Despite the highly varied subject matters – from intimate trauma to global crises –, these plays are all deeply political. Not only do many of them address highly topical issues, such as the climate crisis or the dismantling of patriarchal norms, but they also address the question of the political efficacy of theatre. As suggested by Hannah Greenstreet in her analysis of Ella Hickson's *The Writer*, we are unsure whether theatre can indeed help “the world to change shape” but its attempt to do so needs to be acknowledged. Rejecting didacticism, these plays wonder what theatre can do rather than assert that theatre can indeed do something.

The first part of the volume focuses on ecodramaturgies and global crises and opens with Alex Watson's essay entitled “Population concerns, Reproductive Justice, and Gendered Perspectives in Florence Keith-Roach's *Eggs* (2015), Vivienne Franzmann's *Bodies* (2017) and Maud Dromgoole's *3 Billion Seconds* (2018)”. “Seeking to redress the gendered bias on British theatre's depiction of population arguments”, Watson shows how those three female playwrights challenge the predominantly male perspectives on population control and foreground the limits and dangers of these neoliberal ideologies. In her chapter called “Sexual and Gender-Based Violence on Female Bodies: Ecofeminism in Lucy Kirkwood's *Maryland* (2021) and Ellie Kendrick's and RashDash's *Hole* (2018)”, Verónica Rodríguez shows how the plays resonate with her own and possibly other women's life experience, drawing on Kim Solga's belief that feminist criticism means taking into account “the body of the artist as well as the body of the critic” (12). The chapter draws on Mary Daly's concept of “*gyn/ecology*” and attempts to “reinsert the body at the heart of politics”. In her analysis of Lucy Prebble's *Enron* (2009), Eleanor Stewart uses Zygmunt Bauman's concept of “liquid modernity” to throw light on the play's inventive dramaturgy. Building on Bauman's 2000 book, Stewart examines how Prebble plays with naturalism, thus conveying “the uncertain, transient nature of the modern human condition,

and Solga 61). It is as if, in a naturalistic aesthetics, the story of the woman on stage contained the modalities of her own submission or abuse.

brought about by the fluid, unstable nature of post-industrial capitalism". In the final chapter of Part I, "How to Survive a Crisis: Forming a New Self in Zinnie Harris's *How to Hold Your Breath* (2015)", William C. Boles focuses on the personal and ethical repercussions of neoliberalism. Boles argues that Harris's *How to Hold Your Breath* differs from the many other Great Recession plays because of its striking temporality. Rather than looking back at the crisis, the main character Dana is thrown in the midst of chaos, and is forced to reconsider her ethical stance as she embarks on a journey from self-interest to selflessness.

The second part of this volume scrutinizes the politics of intimacy and the way in which stories of the self, of others and of the world are deeply intertwined. In the opening chapter, "Ella Hickson's *ANNA* (2019) and Lucy Kirkwood's *Mosquitoes* (2017): Staging the Female Body Electric", Vicky Angelaki shows how the female characters' bodies are "charged from outside, but also from within", breaking the illusory boundary between private and public, between "externally determined motivations" and "moral imperatives". In the following chapter, Elisabeth Angel-Perez examines debbie tucker green's "traumatic dramaturgies", showing how trauma infiltrates the text as well as its blank spaces. Once again refuting the personal versus political dichotomy, Angel-Perez posits that "it is through an intimate approach that tucker green gives voice to the ethical scandals which, well beyond the individual subject, address our societies in crisis in a globalized world". In chapter seven, Lianna Mark considers autofiction in the theatre, a largely underexplored field when compared with the recent interest in autofictional novels. In "Who Gets to Speak and How?": Staging Autofiction in Debris Stevenson's *Poet in da Corner* (2018) and Ella Hickson's *The Writer* (2018)", Mark defines these plays as "self-conscious acts of storytelling", "aware of the political insufficiency of a storytelling act" yet very much trying to effect a change.

The third part of the volume is dedicated to formal experimentations and how they serve the playwrights' political agenda, thus questioning "the capacity of theatre to change the world", as Hannah Greenstreet does in her chapter "'I want the world to change shape': Form and politics in Ella Hickson's *The Writer*" (2018). Refuting the analogy between liquid modernity and liquid dramaturgy, Greenstreet suggests that it is rather the combination of naturalistic and experimental forms which account for *The Writer*'s "radical politics" and its profound ambivalence, making it impossible for the audience to decide "which view, if any, is being endorsed by the play". Greenstreet's focus on a juxtaposition of forms is carried over into Jeanne Schaaf's chapter, "Challenging Realism: The Confines of Domesticity in Morna Pearson's Plays". Schaaf applies Elaine Aston's concept of "broken realism" ("Bad Girls' and 'Sick Boys'", 85) to Morna Pearson's plays, showing how they constantly oscillate between hyper and magic re-

alism. Such fluctuating aesthetics, Schaaf argues, reflect the characters' unstable ethics. In the following chapter, "Alice Birch – A Poet in the Theatre", Claire Hélié refuses to consider Birch's "poetic style" as a stock phrase randomly applied to the playwright but rather as invested with authentic meaning. Hélié breaks down Birch's text, probing its syntax, punctuation, and specific lexicon to map out a "feminist soundscape that locates the traumatic experience of patriarchy in language". In the final chapter, Déborah Prudhon scrutinizes the ethical issues raised by verbatim drama and more particularly by Alecky Blythe's *The Girlfriend Experience* which takes place in a brothel and may therefore appeal to the audience's voyeuristic penchant. The ethical responsibility of the playwright, actors and audience is foregrounded as Blythe's use of headphone verbatim raises the question of appropriation.

The collection ends with interviews of two of the most imaginative and innovative contemporary British playwrights – Ella Hickson and Lucy Kirkwood. At that point, the phrase "contemporary British playwrights" replaces "women playwrights" since this volume will hopefully contribute to the "mental androgyny" Polly Stenham hoped for twelve years ago (Bano et al.), making the use of the words "female" or "women" redundant. If "we are not over that" just yet, we may very well be in a near future.

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I Ecodramaturgies and Global Crisis

Alex Watson

Population Concerns, Reproductive Justice, and Gendered Perspectives in Florence Keith-Roach's *Eggs* (2015), Vivienne Franzmann's *Bodies* (2017) and Maud Dromgoole's *3 Billion Seconds* (2018)

Abstract: Since the theories of Thomas Robert Malthus, the debate on population control has been predominantly dictated by male perspectives. With ecological concerns becoming more pronounced in the British public consciousness over the 2010s, onstage representations of population control as a potential solution to climate crisis increased in volume. However, the most popular examples of these plays were, again, mostly from cis male-identifying creatives. Seeking to redress the gendered bias on British theatre's depiction of population arguments, this chapter uses feminist scholarship to analyse three productions by female writers and directors that deal with concerns of populationism and reproductive justice.

The first of these is Maud Dromgoole's *3 Billion Seconds* (2018). The production is explored through the concept of demopopulationism, which dictates that some parts of a nation's demography should be coerced, dissuaded, or forcibly prevented from reproduction. *3 Billion Seconds* is argued to demonstrate that such taxonomic-informed logic leads to a cynical dehumanisation of others. The second case study is Florence Keith-Roach's *Eggs* (2015). Using the framework of reproductive justice—which highlights whether individuals have the free right to choose whether to have children or not, and if their decisions are supported and respected—the analysis is centred on how the two female protagonists of *Eggs* do not receive full reproductive justice in the neoliberal society of 2010s Britain. The final section explores Vivienne Franzmann's *Bodies* (2017) and reflects on the three plays' use of form: particularly, their uses of “fluid realism” and satire to depict populationism, with *Bodies* showing the assumed superiority of citizens in the Global North through its narrative of surrogacy. The conclusion then underlines how these plays warn against the masculinised biases of neoliberal and populationist ideologies.

Introduction

“We are a plague on earth” (4)—so goes the opening line of Maud Dromgoole’s *3 Billion Seconds* (Arcola, London, 2018). This statement can be seen as an extreme form of a sentiment that was increasingly felt in 2010s Britain, as concerns of the climate crisis brought into stark consideration the profound ecological damage being enacted by humankind—in great part due to the actions of the UK and the rest of the wealthy Global North. With the rising feeling of crisis, theatre such as Mike Bartlett’s *Earthquakes in London* (Royal National Theatre, London, 2010), Duncan Macmillan’s *Lungs* (Studio Theatre, Washington D. C., 2011), and Katie Mitchell, Chris Rapley, and Macmillan’s *2071* (Royal Court Theatre, London, 2014) offered representations, narratives, and (in the case of the latter) direct provocations that questioned how its audiences should, and could, respond. One such proposal—both in these plays, and in the socio-political dialogue around climate crisis more generally—seemed to be in curbing population growth. The environmental philosopher Philip Cafaro writes, for example, that it is one of climate crisis’ “two primary causes”; with the other, carbon emissions, being tied to the contemporaneous ways in which much of the growing population lives (46). The opening line of *3 Billion Seconds*, then, would have been recognisable as a clarion call against the image of a greedy, wasteful, expanding human race contributing to ecological (self-)destruction.

However, population control comes with significant moral and ethical concerns. In terms of its relation to climate crisis, it presupposes a scepticism that humans will be able to live without high carbon-emitting lifestyles—which arguably limits any imaginative capacity for performative change. Populationism also often casts classist, racist, and ableist aspersions on who should and should not have children, informed by a history linked to eugenics and racial cleansing: the metaphor of pestilence in the first line of *3 Billion Seconds*, for example, also relates to the practices of dehumanisation that have led to individuals of certain identities being treated as an ailment needing to be “cured”. Yet, what links the most egregious examples of population control to its more benign modes is gendered control: the policing, coercing, and curtailing of reproductive female bodies. This has been true since the late-18th century, when the most influential thinker on population control, Thomas Robert Malthus—and the following neo-Malthusian movement led by Francis Place—theorised that strict limits on reproduction were required.

As Elizabeth Spahn writes, “advocating female fertility control as if it were the single most significant strain on the environment, or the most efficient and direct method for stabilizing or reducing population, retains a surprising vi-

tality” while, for example, “no one seriously suggests ‘controlling’ the consumer ‘explosion’ in order to save the planet” (1301).¹ Furthermore, such decisions and debates on the issue rarely take female perspectives into account. As Naomi McAuliffe states, “the ‘population control’ debate is remarkably devoid of women. You know, the ones that are having the babies”.² This has also been true of representations, articulations, and provocations on population control on the 2010s British stage. Prominent figures such as Katie Mitchell, Ella Hickson, and Lucy Kirkwood have engaged with these concerns in the context of ecological destruction,³ but overall, creatives of the more notable examples of climate crisis theatre exploring population control—as with British theatre more generally—have predominantly been cis, white men.⁴ Though writers like Macmillan and Bartlett should not be condemned for staging pressing topics, the institutions that have championed them have been biased towards showcasing creatives of their identities; while some of these individuals such as Matthew Warchus, the artistic director of the Old Vic, have actively limited female voices on the stage.⁵

This chapter, then, looks to platform and analyse three plays led by female-identifying writers and directors that have heretofore seen more “fringe” produc-

1 Spahn’s article traces a link between the construction of the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River and the one-child policy of China, with how both operations used control of “resources” to demonstrate status and secure dominance.

2 McAuliffe—a feminist writer and Amnesty International’s Scottish programme director—authored the quoted article in response to Charles Coven writing in *The Sunday Times* that “less benefits will result in fewer children and therefore less consumption” (McAuliffe)—a few months after David Cameron’s austerity-focused Conservative coalition government took office in 2010.

3 These include Mitchell’s aforementioned, collaborative *2071* as well as her German-language production of Macmillan’s *Lungs* (*Atmen*; Schaubühne, Berlin, 2013, translated by Corinna Brocher); Hickson’s *Oil* (Almeida Theatre, London, 2016); and Kirkwood’s *The Children* (Royal Court, 2016), and *Mosquitoes* (National Theatre, 2017). For more on these productions, see Vicky Angelaki’s *Theatre & Environment* (2019), and my “Contemporary Catastrophes” (2022).

4 Climate crisis theatre—which I refer to elsewhere with the acronym “CCT” (“Contemporary Catastrophes”)—is used here to denote theatre that demonstrates explicit or highly inferred engagement with the climate crisis as a subject matter, whether through textual references or dramaturgical choices.

5 Warchus directed the popular 2019 revival of Macmillan’s *Lungs* at his theatre, which replaced a planned revival of *Sylvia* (2018), a “suffragette musical” by female creatives. Though the replacement was likely not willed, this did mean that Warchus only programmed one play by a female writer in that year (this being Lucy Prebble’s *A Very Expensive Poison*; 2019). As Victoria Sadler’s now-defunct blog showed—which tracked main London theatres’ inclusion of female artists (Stutz)—this was a considerable increase from the year before, when he programmed a grand total of zero.

tions or, at least, have not yet been greatly discussed in theatre and performance scholarship. Specifically, I explore how these creatives stage and engage with issues of population control and reproductive autonomy informed by the intertwined background of climate crisis and neoliberalism. Each play is examined with a different aspect of populationist concerns. The first of these is the aforementioned *3 Billion Seconds*, which satirically explores anti-natalist and “demo-populationist” ideologies while highlighting the standards of taxonomical worth and dehumanisation that potentially come with these positions. The second is Florence Keith-Roach’s *Eggs* (2015) which, together with *3 Billion Seconds*, can be considered as something as a “foil” for arguably the most successful British climate crisis playtext, *Lungs*. *Eggs* demonstrates the disembodiment faced by women in relation to reproduction, as informed by a neoliberalist society that limits autonomous reproductive choices. The final case study, Vivienne Franzmann’s *Bodies* (2017), further explores the use of form in these plays—namely, practices of satire and “fluid realism”—to criticise gendered population control and the demopopulationism that favours some individuals’ reproduction over others.

3 Billion Seconds and *Eggs* were most notably staged at London’s VAULT Festival and published in its series of annual play collections (2015—). Beth Pitts directed *3 Billion Seconds* while its playwright, Maud Dromgoole, served as the initial director for *Eggs*—created by Orphee Productions, “a female-led collective dedicated to telling stories which challenge gender disparity” (Keith-Roach 3). *Bodies*, on the other hand, debuted on the Royal Court’s Jerwood Upstairs Theatre with direction from Jude Christian. Franzmann, at the time of the production, was a more established playwright (having received the Bruntwood Playwriting Award in 2008); yet *Bodies* has seen limited academic interest comparatively to, for example, Stef Smith’s *Human Animals* (2016), which debuted on the same stage a year prior. All three writers and their works share a commitment to depicting issues of disembodiment, reproduction concerns, and gendered control from a necessarily female-centric position at the levels of production and representation.

As a cis man myself (and a white, British one at that), I am aware of the potentially hypocritical optics of platforming female creatives in a field and debate that I identify, and critique, as being populated by a predominant make-up of white, cis, male voices. To somewhat mitigate this—and to not “speak on behalf of” anyone—I do not explicitly argue for or against any route on population control policy aside from critiquing the policing of female reproductive bodies which, unfortunately, is inherent in many pro-populationist arguments. My primary focus here is to explore how creatives that identify as the gender that, chiefly (as McAuliffe puts it), is “having the babies” represent and engage

with concerns related to population control. Though I argue that centring female perspectives should be paramount for debates on population control, I certainly do not suggest that all those who identify as female have the ability or desire to have children. Rather, comparatively to men, the decisions of childbirth and parenthood (and indeed, the environmental destruction and potential resulting migration caused by climate crisis) have greater embodied considerations for, and effects on, women. Furthermore, as discussed in the second section, those who choose not to have children can suffer from societal biases—in part due to the neoliberal-informed gender oppression that commodifies female bodies. Therefore, especially when population concerns have heretofore been primarily vocalised and led by cis men, it is the voices and creative work of women that require greater representation and investment, and while I cannot offer this in my identity as the author of this chapter, I will offer it in the selection of sources and case studies engaged with here.

Demopopulationism and Dehumanisation in *3 Billion Seconds*

The number of plays on British stages engaging with population control spiked in the 2010s due to the rising awareness of the climate crisis—but were not distinct to this decade. A trailblazer of theatre that explored ecological concerns more generally, Caryl Churchill focused on the increased technology and disembodiment of reproduction in *A Number* (Royal Court, 2002), where a father has various dialogues with multiple cloned versions of his son; as well as her radio play *Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen* (BBC Radio 3, 1971), which depicts a dystopian, heavily polluted London where childbirth has become strictly regulated.⁶ Earlier than Churchill, the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw—a highly influential figure in British theatre—queried “the population question” in the inter-war period. His *The Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Socialism, Capitalism, Sovietism and Fascism* (1928) appeals for the use of “artificial birth control” by his eponymous readers, being “the most humane and civilized” prevention of conception and the most mindful of “the realities of our sexual nature” (148). How-

⁶ During the 2010s, *A Number* played at the Menier Chocolate Factory, London (2010), the Nuffield, Southampton (2014), the Lyceum, Edinburgh (2017), the Liverpool Everyman (2018), and later at the Bridge, London (2020). Though *Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen* saw no professional productions in 2010s Britain, it saw international revivals in Winnipeg (2010), Rome (2018), and Nicosia (2019).

ever, Bernard Shaw's populationism went to the extent of his advocacy for the passing of laws in Parliament to "cement eugenics into the workings of the state (for example, forced sterilisation)", which was raised in an outvoted Private Members' Bill in 1931 (Eddo-Lodge 21). Furthermore, his petitions to "the intelligent woman" emblematised a culture of how female perspectives have variously been lectured to, assumed, or simply excluded from the historically male-dominated discourse around population control.

Indeed, population control is not a new idea—even if it found renewed vigour in the context of increased public perception of the climate crisis—and arguments against certain practical applications of it, or against *controlistas* ("as feminists dub them" [Spahn 1298]) more generally have been made by feminist scholarship. Betsy Hartmann's "Population, environment and security: a new trinity" (1998) traces how the titular concerns have been theorised together to justify the policing of female bodies—a precedent set in 1960s–70s United Nations' global policy-making, where governments such as the UK's "[u]nderpinned by the theory of global overpopulation, influenced by neo-Malthusianism, and made possible by new birth control technologies" (Bracke) sought to increase birth control in the decolonised nations of the Global South. Hartmann's *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs* (1987; which saw a 3rd edition released in 2016) contextualises population growth within entrenched gendered inequalities, poverty, and environmental degradation; while Ruth Dion-Mueller's *Population Policy & Women's Rights* (1993) examines how technological fixes to population (such as family planning) have come at the expense of women's needs.

Spahn's previously mentioned article from 1997 expands on these needs, of which she identifies four that improve women's lives while combating rising population—these being: secondary education for girls; full access to reproductive health care; economic opportunities, especially employment where actual wages are directly paid to the female workers; and personal freedom on making education, health, and economic decisions (1308–10). Spahn's argument rests on the contention that practices of *control* will have "loopholes" made around them (such as the increased, gendered infanticide in China following the adoption of the one-child policy), while structural change that betters the education and lives of women inherently results in the decrease of birth rates. In the 2010s, a coalition of feminist scholars identified, defined, and elaborated on various subsections of populationism.⁷ Among these, "demopopulationism" is the most in-

7 These include the gender and sexuality theorists Rajani Bhatia and Jade S. Sasser, the feminist geographer Diana Ojeda, the public health researcher and social scientist Sarojini Nadimpally,

sightful for the depictions of population concerns in the plays explored here. A portmanteau of demography and populationism, the term is described as “the ideologies and politics that promote interventions into human populations with the goal of producing ‘optimal’ size and composition” (Hendrixson et al. 310).

Bhatia et al. also find from their research that demopopulationism reveals “the long-standing influence of Malthusian ideas in demographic knowledge production [...]. This results in a highly classist, neocolonialist, racist, and masculinized bias”, which has “systematically identif[ied] marginalized [...] individuals as problematic bodies for fertility control”, especially in the Global South (337; see also McCann; Murphy). Demopopulationism, then, carries shades of archaic ideas of genetic supremacy and eugenics while operating under the more general concern of eco-consciousness and self-empowerment. Instances of demopopulationism in practice include coercive sterilisation programmes focused on lower-caste Indian women (Sama et al.), Californian women’s prisons (Law), and Roma women in Europe (Albert). As Bhatia et al. surmise, these practices demonstrate how, for certain authorities, “[s]ome lives are systematically treated as being redundant or excessive” (338). These extreme examples of demopopulationism also show that it is, essentially, a more subtle and systemic form of eugenics: though its aims, rather than breeding an idealised version of the (able-bodied, white) human are to create ideal population sizes and compositions through coercing, manipulating, and policing the (female) members of various societies’ demographics. Demopopulationism does, however, differentiate from anti-natalism. This relatively broad term—which overall refers to the proposition that procreation is morally wrong—encompasses several views but looks to dissuade people *in general* from having children. Demopopulationism, on the other hand, looks to stop *certain people* from having children, while encouraging others to do so.

Anti-natalism appeared to grow in 2010s Britain, often informed by ecological concerns. For example, a circulated study on effective individual actions for climate mitigation contends childlessness as the best strategy (Wynes and

the medical anthropologist Ellen E. Foley, and Anne Hendrixson, the leader of PopDev: a feminist programme challenging population control. In a themed section (2020) of the *Gender, Place & Culture* journal, the intersecting terms they introduce include: “necropopulationism”—“the ways in which racialized and gendered populations are the target of a range of violences” (Hendrixson et al. 309); “geopopulationism”—“the ways that spaces are produced to contain or exclude, surveil, and regulate particular bodies” (310); and “biopopulationism”, which “theorizes the production of valued life, including ideal and idealized consumer reproduction within biomedical markets” (311).

Nicholas); while another article detailed how guilt and blame at childbirth and childrearing have risen to the extent that British parents have even expressed some regret at having children in the context of climate crisis (Wiseman; Schneider-Mayerson and Ling). Demopopulationism, insidiously, uses anti-natalist concerns as fuel while essentially refuting its rationale—anti-natalism looks to curb population growth because of the ecological “waste” that humans create (Mackellan, qtd. in Fleming). In terms of the argument for climate crisis mitigation, targeting certain individuals to halt reproduction might be deemed logical when considering that some humans consume more resources and create more emissions than others—those in the societies of the Global North, for example. Yet, it has not historically been these individuals who have been so targeted, as shown in the examples above (Sama et al.; Law; Albert), as well as the class- and race-oriented eugenics movement in early-20th century Britain (Stone), and the prejudice against those families on state subsidies and benefits (McAuliffe, see footnote 2).

Demopopulationism is an insightful concept for exploring how Maud Dromgoole’s *3 Billion Seconds* represents reproduction and populationism in a context of climate crisis. Developed on an Arvon course—a residential writing retreat “under the tutorage of Chris Thorpe and Alice Birch” (Dromgoole 3)—*3 Billion Seconds* debuted in an earlier version in 2018 at the Arcola Theatre in Dalston, London, before playing at VAULT in 2019 with direction from Beth Pitts (this being the version I refer to, and cite, here). Dromgoole notes that the play was informed by “being a member of a fair few zero-waste groups, and observing the sporadic militancy and absolute hypocrisy of trying to be a good person in a confusing world” (Dromgoole et al.). With the concentrated focus on issues of population signposted in the playtext’s epigraph—being a quote from Malthus (5)—the narrative focuses on a heteronormative couple, Daisy (played by Rhiannon Neads) and Michael (Tayla Kovacevic-Ebong), who are both population activists who tour to “any conference centre, / Student Union / Or village hall who would have us” (8) to give talks on human overpopulation.

The form of the play is mostly made up of short lines delivered in quick succession by the two performers, which contribute to a sense of speed, breathlessness, and rising crisis, enabled by “rapid fire pace from director Beth Pitts” (Kressly). Neads and Kovacevic-Ebong also multi-role as several other characters including Michael’s best friend Sarah, his father Jack, Daisy’s doctor, and the couple’s neighbour Janice, resulting in continuous, uninterrupted action. The delivery of the dialogue, initially, sees Daisy and Michael directly and inclusively addressing the audience who, as the stage directions state, “begin as their allies, but as they become more intimate and insular with each other, we lose them” (6). This reflects the pivotal event that drives the narrative action—namely, Daisy’s

unplanned pregnancy, which the couple must reconcile against their militant populationism. As she muses, “[t]his is gonna start looking hypocritical” (52). When they both decide to continue with the pregnancy, they conclude that, in order to offset the environmental cost, they must kill other people up to a total of 3 billion seconds—“the life expectancy” for women in developed countries (38). As Daisy justifies it, “[t]his isn’t some head in the sand won’t get your hands dirty starve the foreign kids. This is us properly accounting for our child” (70). Informed by their enjoyment of “maths” (13), they deduct the estimated remaining lifespan of their victims against their total target, with those they kill being the four secondary characters.

Initially, Daisy and Michael offer information and advice similar to the four needs identified by Spahn including education (9) and “[a]ccess to proper medical care” (14). Yet, as *controlistas*, they both approve of family planning programmes such as those in Iran and China, stating of the latter that “of course their methods were highly controversial. / Effective. / Autocratic. And. / Sadly. CanNot be replicated in other countries” (14; sic). Although they note that “babies born in Britain add on average one hundred and sixty times more greenhouse emissions than babies born in Ethiopia” (32), for example, their views on population control do not appear to target wealthier countries or, indeed, the actual carbon-emitting, resource-consuming infrastructure provided and maintained by those countries. Indeed, with their examples of population control being taken from nations outside the Global North, this suggests their populationism—rather than being generally anti-natalist—is racialised.

Again, there is some self-reflexivity on the potentially racist implications of their populationism, with Daisy raising concerns on: “that bit you’ve added about Muslims being the fastest growing population on earth [...] it just sounds a bit scaremongery” (21); but claims that she herself can’t be racist, as she is dating Michael, who is Black (22). When Michael refutes this, she begins to cry, and he gets on his hands and knees in apology, to which she responds, “I quite like you on your knees” (23). This interaction demonstrates the shallowness of their self-reflection on the potential racist intersections with populationism. Furthermore, Daisy and Michael—who are both well-educated, young, middle-class, and heteronormative—seem to believe that the existence of their child will be inherently more “worthy” than the lives of their victims—or anyone else. The most explicit statement of the destructiveness and hypocrisy of demopopulationist logic in the production is Michael’s prayer for global catastrophe: “Please / Bring back HIV / Bring back Stalin / Don’t ban the bomb / Bomb the shit out of somewhere, everywhere I’m not / And please, please someone make space for my beautiful, beautiful baby girl” (59).

Daisy and Michael's delusion that their child is, inexplicably, worth more than the lives of other people "somewhere, anywhere" reflects more high-profile stagings of population concerns in 2010s British climate crisis theatre. In Bartlett's *Earthquakes in London*, for example, the anti-natalist theories of Robert, a climate scientist, considerably affect his pregnant daughter Freya to the extent that she seeks to take her own life—despite a heavy implication that her unborn child would be an effective proponent of climate mitigation. While this critiques the gendered coercion of *controlistas*, it also provides an unironic vision of a middle-class Messianic saviour figure in Freya's future daughter.⁸ Macmillan's *Lungs*, interestingly, gives directors the tools to critique such ideals of middle-class exceptionalism. Its two characters, W and M, are a heteronormative couple who spend the majority of the narrative debating whether or not to have a child. At one point, W ponders whether their baby might be the one to vindicate their "avocado importing" lifestyle by being the future person who will "work it all out [...] save everything, everyone, the world, polar bears, Bangladesh" (151). Ariane de Waal writes that W's hubristic, neocolonialist fantasy is written as "so exaggerated that it can barely be taken seriously" (51), but "[t]his is not how the play has been received", with W and M consistently depicted in production as "likeable characters" (52) whose far-fetched excuses for their child's justification are not interrogated by directors as middle-class exceptionalism—even when M considers the possibility of a "license" required for parents to stop the uneducated, non-book-reading populace from "multiplying like rats" (152) and W proposes a "cull" of "everyone by about two thirds" (171).

3 Billion Seconds, however, thoroughly critiques this position in its central couple by heightening the extremities of how they "justify" their child. Their actions become representative of the violence of demopopulationism: here, literally murdering individuals to make constitutive changes to a population based on a demographic taxonomy—a hierarchy that *their* child apparently sits ascendant in. Their first three victims are Michael's father, Jack, who suffers from severe Alzheimer's; Daisy's doctor, who is politically opposed to their ideology ("he's an anti-abortionist in a position of medical power so the net gain is probably even exponentially better"; 65); and their downstairs neighbour Janice, whom they demonise as a "crackhead" (25)—convincing themselves that she is badly-educated and working-class in order to excuse her death: "[s]he's gonna eat pizzas plugged into a ventilator till she's ninety watching *Britain's Got Talent* wear-

⁸ Rupert Goold's debut production of *Earthquakes in London* had other representational issues. Aside from its dubious use of "excessive" scenery to show the wasteful ways contemporary humans are living (Bartlett 5), the seventeen-strong cast only contained two Black performers in relatively marginal roles.

ing sweatshop Primark” (67). However, Daisy and Michael themselves seem to be unable to adapt to a greener way of living: seen in their very brief conversion to veganism (30). Their demopopulationist logic, then, which looks to create “ideal” population statistics—less people, with certain identities privileged over others—is scathingly demonstrated as prejudiced and selfish.

Arguably, Dromgoole and Pitts do not frame Daisy and Michael’s decision to have a child as worthy of critique—rather, it is the extremity and absurdity of their logic that is at fault as they justify their decision by violently staking their taxonomic worth. As Jen Harvie writes on inter-generational conflict, “[g]reater equality and better living conditions for more people will be achieved not through adversarial [...] competition but through the recognition of [...] interdependency and practices of [...] solidarity” (333). Adversely to this, Daisy and Michael practice a demopopulationist logic against identities deemed taxonomically “lesser” than theirs to the extent that they become antagonistic and territorial against any others who are *not them*—becoming closed-off from the audience, and ultimately devaluing the privilege of others to the extent that Michael even kills his best friend, Sarah, to reach their quota of 3 billion seconds. With the production’s form reliant on the performers multi-roling the secondary, murdered characters, there is a sense that Daisy and Michael’s demopopulationist rationale is not only dehumanising, but self-destructive.

Reproductive Justice and Disembodiment in *Eggs*

Although demopopulationism is a concept that allows a recognition of how population control in societies can be organised around cultural prejudices—privileging the birth rates of some identities while attempting to curtail those of others—there are multiple other unjust factors that govern citizens’ reproductive choices. In 2010s Britain, one such factor was, increasingly, how the effects of neoliberalism impacted individuals’ decision-making on whether to start a family. Loretta J. Ross and Rickie Solinger’s framework of “reproductive justice”, which splices together reproductive rights with social justice, can be used to explore how effective societies are at championing individuals’ reproductive autonomy. Reproductive justice is defined through three primary principles: “(1) the right not to have a child; (2) the right to have a child; and (3) the right to parent children in safe and healthy environments” (9). The concept, then, is based on the freedom to make reproductive decisions outside of coercive practices, and for those decisions to be granted the appropriate social support. This section explores how—in the context of climate crisis concerns, demopopulationism, and neoliberalism—reproductive justice was, arguably, not fully met in 2010s Britain.

This is demonstrated in Florence Keith-Roach's *Eggs* which, like *3 Billion Seconds*, recentres contemporary anxieties of neoliberalism, parenthood, and population concerns to a markedly female perspective with both the cast and the creative team. Before playing at Waterloo's fourth VAULT festival (2016), *Eggs* debuted in 2015 as a work-in-progress at the Edinburgh Fringe with direction and dramaturgy from Maud Dromgoole. The narrative focuses on two middle-class friends in their late-twenties to early-thirties, referred to only as Girl Two (played by Amani Zardoe) and Girl One (played by Keith-Roach herself) as, over the course of a year, they have several ups and downs in their relationship, as well as multiple conversations on, or around, the subject of eggs. Their discussions revolve around consumption, fertility, and potential motherhood; as well as the ethics of vegetarians who eat eggs, and a specifically shaped kind of vibrating sex toy. Rather than focusing on the debates of a heteronormative couple on potential parenthood or being explicitly concerned with climate crisis (as with *Lungs* and *3 Billion Seconds*), *Eggs* focuses on the specific reproductive choices of two women—and how their choices are compromised by certain factors.

After decades of neoliberalist policy implementation, Britain in the 2010s could be regarded as totalised by this ideology—exacerbated by a continued pro-austerity Conservative government that made sustained cuts to social services and funding. Informed by this, the generation commonly known as “millennials” (generally speaking, those born between 1981 and 1996; see Dimock) found themselves, in early adulthood, bereft of the same economic opportunities as their parents due to a rising cost of living, increasing house prices, and saturated job markets. By the end of the decade, this resulted in 80% of women who were childless by midlife being so “due to circumstance, not infertility” because of “a tapestry of systemic issues” including student debt, career focus, house prices, affordable childcare, and a lack of financial security (Day, qtd. in Kalia). Essentially, the realities of living in the neoliberal society of 2010s Britain meant that many of those women who wished to have children lacked reproductive justice—either not being economically able to pursue parenthood, or faced with the prospect of having to raise children in precarious circumstances and environments.

This, of course, further effected those who were more keenly targeted by demopopulationism, which intersected with neoliberalism by capitalising “on notions of female empowerment” and so “exploit[ed] the self-governing neoliberal subject” (Bhatia et al. 338; see also Foster; Sasser, *On Infertile Ground*; Wilson). Demopopulationist interventions situate reproductive choice as “embodied environmental responsibility” (Sasser, “Population” 58; qtd in Bhatia et al. 339): placing partial blame for climate crisis on “irresponsible” female reproduction and

framing its solution on a personal choice to curb childbirth, coercing individuals' reproductive justice—rather than understanding that the cause, and the solution, must rest on broader systems and concerted actions.

Eggs represents the often economically and socially difficult position of choosing to have a child in a neoliberal society through Girl Two. She aspires to quit her office job, believing that “the job I want to do, the one I was, in fact, born to do, is to have children” (16)—though Girl One notes that doing so would make her “bored and resentful and poor” (39). With the society they live in, Girl Two's aspiration to “[m]eet a husband, build a family” (16) is presented as difficult, if not out of reach—her desire to “[s]mash through the brick wall that is thirty” (32) with a settled partner and child being painted as an objective that was only financially viable in the past, with Girl One judging Girl Two's goal as “backward” (16). Alongside the financial and career-based constraints limiting her choice to have a child, Girl Two also seems to have reached this decision due to reasoning warped by neoliberal logic. She equates parenthood with an office job—swapping one for the other—as well as a marker of social success; a commodification of parenthood.

Furthermore, it is implied that Girl Two's reproductive choice is informed by neoliberal society's erosion of interpersonal connection and interdependence: “[a vanity project designed to fill a void left by society]” (43; original in capitals). The inability for her to attain reproductive justice is also due to how neoliberal society amplifies gender inequalities: she perceives herself as forced into competition with other women (17), while Girl One critiques that she “would shrivel up and die without the male gaze” (42). Girl Two's apparent blindness to her embodied oppression leads her to fanatically pursue cis male partners for her objective—regardless of their compatibility (24). This desire for her to achieve her perception of success leads Girl Two into a relationship where she becomes pregnant, only for her boyfriend to leave her for another woman, and so she decides to terminate her pregnancy. Girl Two, then, chooses to have a child, but cannot fulfil this due to the limitations imposed on her by neoliberal society.

Despite not wanting to have children, Girl One also does not receive reproductive justice. This is because her choice is consistently judged and questioned—most often by herself. Despite critiquing Girl One's “backward” goals and her seeking of the “male gaze”, she finds little else of satisfaction or potential aspiration in her own life. This seems to be because Girl Two's objectives—which she rebukes—are assumed to be normative standards for women. Therefore, Girl One sees herself as “an alien. A hatched thing. This creature who has the shell of a woman” (33). She rationalises her depressive tendencies as due to being a self-confessed “product of IVF”, a “synthetic child” (10), rather than the pressures and anxieties of a neoliberal worldview she would rather not conform to. Her

choice to not have children and her self-judged undesirability informs her mental wellbeing to the point where she stripteases to a male audience member (44) in a literal disembodiment—mimicking Scarlett Johansson’s seductive, destructive extra-terrestrial character in Jonathan Glazer’s eerie sci-fi film *Under the Skin* (2013).

Girl One’s apparent divorce from herself, then, is perhaps due to her self-regard as a birthed “product”; a symbolic commodification also seen in the capitalist implications of Girl Two’s reference to motherhood as equated with an office job. This is similar to *Lungs*, with the central couple beginning their debate on whether to have a child while browsing an Ikea store. As with Angelaki’s assessment of how *Lungs*’ dialogue demonstrates neoliberalism’s totalisation of everyday life (*Social and Political Theatre* 117), *Eggs* too suggests that the decision to have a child in a neoliberal society is perceptually disembodied—alike to browsing a new commodity with all its economic implications.⁹ The meanings encapsulated in *Eggs*’ title and discussed by the characters point towards a merging of female sexuality and fertility with consumption and commodity. This amalgamation informs Girl Two’s desire to have a child as a marker of social success and leads Girl One (despite not wanting to have children) to consider herself as incomplete and disposable because of a perceived lack of desirability.

The neoliberal-informed modes through which the two characters of *Eggs* view themselves and parenthood are best expressed in how they describe others as parasitical. Girl Two defines her past partners as “insecure fuck-ups who suck me dry like a vampire” (25) and, when pregnant, describes “a life force [...] stealing my life, my youth” (38). Girl One finds herself judicating the population growth of nits in her own hair, as she blithely states: “I submerged my head in a bath of vodka, you know, to make them drunk and defenceless? I mean if it worked with the Native Americans?” (80). Her uncomfortable reference to historical, violent methods of population control here manifests in more extreme fantasies when she expresses an urge to “stab” a pregnant woman “in the belly” (36). It even becomes apparent that the friendship between Girl One and Two is somewhat parasitical: being formed over the traumatic loss of a close mutual friend. These images, metaphors, and discussions of parasitical behaviour (while feeding into anti-natalist arguments on humanity’s effect on the ecosystem) relates to how neoliberal subjects are parasitical of one another—with

⁹ This merging of economic and familial considerations similarly featured in 2000s British plays such as Dennis Kelly’s *Love and Money* (Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester, 2006), Polly Stenham’s *That Face* (Royal Court, 2007), and Bartlett’s *My Child* (Royal Court, 2007).

even future children positioned as such—and to how neoliberalism is parasitical of its subjects to the point of disembodiment.

In the play's final scene, as Girl Two visits Girl One in hospital after a car crash, their parasite terminology is dropped in favour of a more caring expression of dependency when Girl Two reveals she is having an abortion following her partner's infidelity. Though Girl Two worries about her biological clock, Girl One offers "I'm always here for the harvesting. [...] You can have my eggs. Any time you want" (49). Though some traces of bodily commodification remain in this statement, these are made more in a commitment of interdependency rather than through capitalistic ideology. The play, then, does not pass moral judgements on parenthood or populationism. Rather, it demonstrates how reproductive choices are coerced and limited by the economic and social realities of neoliberal ideology. Despite representing different reproductive choices, neither Girl One or Two have reproductive justice due to the exacerbated gender oppression, parasitical features, and disembodiment of neoliberalism in 2010s Britain. Like *3 Billion Seconds* then, *Eggs* looks to resituate the representation of reproduction concerns to a female perspective, with a nuanced portrayal of how these concerns—bereft of reproductive justice due to the context of neoliberalism—can be dehumanising, disembodying, and dangerous.

Form and Satire in *Bodies*

A final consideration that this chapter explores is the use of form by female theatre makers to represent population concerns—specifically, their deployment of satire. While *Eggs* and *3 Billion Seconds* critique the lack of reproductive justice in neoliberal societies and essentialist stances on populationism, they are also very funny. The central friendship of *Eggs* has the dysfunctional dynamic of a sitcom like *Broad City* (2014–19), while the extreme demopopulationist narrative of *3 Billion Seconds* offers a scorching portrayal of self-righteous, eco-conscious standpoints in something of a satire of *Lungs*' form and themes. Beginning with a cursory exploration of feminist uses of form in modern British theatre, this chapter then specifically looks at satire as a way of inspecting population concerns, taking Vivienne Franzmann's *Bodies* as a case study. Directed by Jude Christian and debuting at the Royal Court's Jerwood Upstairs Theatre in July 2017, the narrative focuses on the efforts of a wealthy middle-class couple to have a child through surrogacy.

The play opens with a scene between Clem (played by Justine Mitchell) and her child, simply named Daughter (Hannah Roe), though it becomes apparent that Clem is speaking with an ideal, imagined child—who returns in several in-

terludes through the narrative. Being unable to conceive on their own, Clem and her husband Josh (Brian Ferguson) have spent “twenty-two thousand pounds” (18) for a facility in India to impregnate and use as a surrogate the lower-caste Lakshmi (Salma Hoque)—who has her own children. This raises the ire of Clem’s father, David (Philip Goldacre), a socialist and former union worker (14) who has worsening motor neurone disease: Clem and Josh pay for constant at-home medical assistance for him (through the play, this is mostly fulfilled by Oni, played by Lorna Brown). As the surrogacy laws change in India, Lakshmi escapes the facility in fear for her unsupervised children and panicked by the foreign child growing inside of her (which she names “*Kavva*”—Hindi for “crow” [92]). Clem and Josh fly to India to ensure they retrieve their baby, and the narrative ends with Clem having her long-seated wish for a daughter, but at the cost of her father’s increased depression without familial care, and Lakshmi’s daughter (who had disappeared during her absence) seemingly abducted by child traffickers.

Franzmann’s text and Christian’s dramaturgy generally use realism—the most widespread form in modern British theatre. Although theorists like Raymond Williams have posed realism as “highly variable” and changing over time (114), it is mostly used to describe a certain adherence to non-surrealist, non-expressionist methods: grounded in a mimetic “reality” that suggests that of everyday life. In feminist theatre scholarship, there are two broad schools of thought on how form should be used: that realism is a reproduction of the patriarchal “reality” that governs society, politics, and culture and so should be rejected (Dolan; Diamond; Case); while the other argues that realist techniques have championed women’s theatre (Stowell; Goddard; Aston). This latter category contends that female theatre makers have advanced and pushed the form of realism—seizing on what Williams identifies as its variability—with Elaine Aston (who revised her initial, critical stance on realism) writing in “Room for Realism?” (2016) that by the end of the 2000s female theatre makers concerned with centring female perspectives were “more fluid” in their “applications of realism [...] shift[ing] away from those conservatively formed, phallogocentric uses of the genre” (32). This “fluid realism” at once represents aspects of the patriarchal realities of contemporary life while seeking to push at them and, importantly, critique them.¹⁰

¹⁰ Aston herself uses the term “viral realism – realism as infectious, contagious and spreading from a ‘host’ of playwrights” with “a capacity for genetic mutation” (33), though I use fluid realism here to emphasise the variable nature of realism.

Bodies, like several other productions explored by Aston that debuted at the Royal Court,¹¹ is an example of fluid realism—mostly using traditional realist practices, but “stretching” them in scenes such as Clem’s imagined dialogues with her daughter, and the collapsing of space between Clem and Lakshmi.¹² Yet, rather than critiquing patriarchal reality, the fluid realism of *Bodies* critiques the contemporary reality of demopopulationist logic and the assumed superiority of the white Global North—in particular, “post-colonial” Britain. This application of fluid realism serves to unsettle the assumptions of primacy the audience might attribute to Clem and her desires while informing *Bodies*’ use of satire. Much like fluid realism, satire can be used to advance feminist objectives because of its ability to simultaneously represent and critique. Gloria Kaufman (who co-edits a volume on the subject) identifies an early theatrical example of this in Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* (5 BCE) (15), and writes that satire works well with a feminist approach because “it seeks to improve us by demonstrating—through devices of irony, of exaggeration, of sarcasm, and of wit—our human folly’, and ’is founded on hope and predicated on a stance of nonacceptance” (14).

There are certainly many examples of British theatre that use satire for feminist ends, with some of the most prominent also debuting at the Royal Court: from Sarah Daniels’ *Ripen Our Darkness* (1981) to Churchill’s *Top Girls* (1982) or Kirkwood’s *NSFW* (2012). Though satire certainly has socio-political limitations (particularly when addressing important, typically non-humorous subjects) and has a precedent of being a masculinist cultural form,¹³ feminist uses of satire can help to make the former more salient and work to redress the latter. Interestingly, research on the ability of satire to communicate environmental concerns specifically has found that “ironic satire may be more useful as a tool for climate change engagement than more playful content that sarcastically presents both sides of the issue debate” (Becker and Anderson, 12), as such humour demands more attention from its audiences (13). *Eggs* and *3 Billion Seconds* seem to deliver

11 These include Fiona Evans’ *Scarborough* (2006), Anupama Chandrasekhar’s *Free Outgoing* (2007), Lucy Kirkwood’s *NSFW* (2012) and, in a later article (“Moving Women Centre Stage”), Zinnie Harris’ *How to Hold Your Breath* (2015) and Penelope Skinner’s *Linda* (2016).

12 *3 Billion Seconds*, too, could be said to employ fluid realism with its continuous action, audience-addressing dialogue, and Daisy and Michael’s near-unbelievably extreme actions. *Eggs*, while not being as stylistically divergent in its realism, does possess a main feature of Serena Anderlini-D’Onofrio’s “feminist mimesis”, a set of representational strategies that look to champion female experiences. Specifically, this is the placing of a female duo “at the center of the dramatic structure usually occupied by the phallic hero” (175).

13 See Rebecca Krefting’s article “Hannah Gadsby: On the Limits of Satire” (2019), which explores the titular stand-up comedian’s self-reflexive utilisation of the form.

both forms: with their productions moving, in turns, from more sarcastic and playful (Horatian) to ironic and searing (Juvenalian) satire.

Bodies, however, positions itself firmly in the ironic, Juvenalian form of satire and—though less obviously humorous than the other two plays—uses satire to dissect the assumed personal superiority in middle-class British liberals, particularly regarding parenthood and populationism. In Franzmann and Christian’s focus on the affluent Clem (who appears to have made her money from exploitative television documentaries such as “*The World’s Fattest Man*” [26]), the production seems to place the audience to see her desires as being of central importance. Though her wish to become a parent is certainly valid, Clem’s dialogue seems to frame her inability to have a child as missing out on a fashionable commodity: “[e]verywhere I look. Everyone I know. Everyone I meet has children. [...] And I fucking hate them for it. Not having a child makes me hate everyone who does” (75). Clem’s imagined Daughter states to her “[y]ou wanted her to have his [Josh’s] laugh. But you wanted her to have your eyes” (78). Clem’s idealised daughter, then, is something of a commodified “designer-baby”: a symptom of the increased contemporary industrialisation and disembodiment of childbirth (Espinoza et al.) and more generally, as similarly represented in *Lungs* and *Eggs*, neoliberal ideology.

Similar to the narrowing perspectives of *3 Billion Seconds*’ Daisy and Michael, Marco De Ambrogi’s response to *Bodies* states that “Clem ultimately defines herself only by her inability to become a mother. In the process, she loses touch with those around her and the choices that she has made” (547).¹⁴ Arguably though, it is her uncompromising drive to become a mother—while armed with the requisite financial assets—that precludes her responsibilities to both her family and those affected by her decisions around the globe. Regarding the former, though Clem pays for constant healthcare for her ailing father, she uses money as a substitute for any real, personal care—David and his carer Oni both state that what he needs is for Clem to be there for him. Similarly, Clem is reminded of how, when her own mother mentioned the positives of childlessness, Clem “pushed” and resultingly injured her (35). As Harvie states, ageism and neglect of the elderly plays into “chrononormative fetishisations of the new” and intersects with “ecological neglect” (344). Clem, then, is too fixated on the “new”—her fantasised child—rather than her actually-existing father.

¹⁴ De Ambrogi compares this to Simon Stone’s adaptation of Federico Garcia Lorca’s *Yerma* (1934) at the Young Vic (2017), which saw the titular main character—who also despondently fails to become pregnant—played by Billie Piper.

Furthermore, Clem's desire for motherhood is informed by the latent racism and neo-colonialism of demopopulationism. Rather than adopt, Clem wishes for her baby to look "as much as is possible, like me and Josh" (30). Therefore, though Lakshmi is the surrogate, Josh is the sperm donor along with a Russian egg donor—as the Daughter queries of Clem: "[d]id you pick her out of a book, a database or something? Was it because she was pretty?" (88). David asks Clem (through Oni) if she "knew that in Russia the surrogate is protected" (73)—implying that Clem and Josh decided to use an Indian surrogate to ensure their rights as the child's parents, at the cost of any protections granted to Lakshmi. De Ambrogi notes that this "is particularly relevant" as at the time of *Bodies*' production "the discussion on the Surrogacy Regulation Bill 2016" in India was "further delayed" in parliament (547). Though the Daughter notes that the exploitation of poor countries will be continued by surrogacy (91), Clem's specific utilisations of a Russian egg donor and an Indian surrogate—who loses her own child at the cost of Clem and Josh's—demonstrates an assumption of her own inherent worth, and her worthiness to have a (white) child that has a surface-based appearance to her and Josh regardless of other women outside of the Global North. Though she furiously pursues her own reproductive justice then, she does so by denying it to others.

Franzmann and Christian frame the audience's perception centrally on Clem's struggle, while gradually having Lakshmi's plight "intrude" into the narrative through a "merging" of their separate spaces—with Lakshmi painting the set around Clem and her family a distinct yellow. This fluid realism is used to satirically present an extreme example of British middle-class assumptions of self-worth over others/Others and demopopulationist hierarchies of who should procreate and who should not—even if their children already exist. This is a mode Franzmann uses in an earlier play with *Clean Break*, *Pests* (Royal Exchange, Manchester, 2014), where the "poverty porn" of contemporaneous discussions about the working-classes was satirised with "impoverished rat-girl" characters on "a set made of rotten mattresses", as Molly McPhee writes (107). The satire of *Bodies* is most evident when Josh visits David to plead for his blessing for Clem's surrogate child. After Josh mentions the care they have provided and the amount they have spent on the child, David (now only able to use an assistive voice activation keyboard), simply repeats the word "money" (116–118). This exchange emphasises how the demopopulationist hierarchy that Clem and Josh have assumed regarding their reproductive justice is simply based on their neoliberal ability to "pay their way".

To summarise, *Bodies* uses a (very much Juvenalian) satirical mode enhanced by fluid realism to underscore British middle-class demopopulationist assumptions of inherent worth—relative to the rest of the world and, particularly,

the Global South. Though the context of climate crisis is barely mentioned in *Bodies*, the destitution of poorer countries and citizens (like Lakshmi) is exploitatively seized on by the play's protagonists and certainly intersects with the resource extraction that has been enacted by the Global North more generally (see, for example, Yusoff). Though the central resolution of the play "pays off" (literally) with Clem obtaining her daughter, this is shown alongside a montage of images which include David's continuing deterioration and depression and Lakshmi's daughter "*danc[ing] on a table. [...] She is wearing make up. Far too old for her*" (124). The happiness and reproductive justice of Clem, then, are explicitly shown to be traded for the loss of Lakshmi whose daughter, like her, will also be exploited.

Conclusion

The three main case studies of this chapter contend that it is not so much overpopulation that will doom humanity to resource scarcity and climate crisis, but the dehumanising ideologies that have informed and exacerbated these catastrophes. The productions of *Eggs*, *3 Billion Seconds*, and *Bodies* all represent how approaches to population growth and reproduction have gendered, racialised positions; being tinged with the violent neoliberalist logics that mobilise systemic injustices such as wealth disparity, dehumanisation, and racism. The majority of predominant British climate crisis theatre engaging with population concerns depict its intertwinement with issues of neoliberalism and climate crisis—but through disproportionately male perspectives. Though there have been (as yet) few works that explore climate crisis and population from trans*, non-binary, and more broadly femme perspectives, the three main case studies here help to redress and reframe issues of population through cis female perspectives. Whereas *Eggs* centres such concerns through embodied female experiences, *3 Billion Seconds* parodies the detached and dehumanising ways that demopopulationist and environmentalist discourses rationalise the climate crisis, while *Bodies* scathingly satirises the assumed superiority of affluent, middle-class, heteronormative, white British potential parents to hierarchically procreate rather than, or at cost to, others/Others. The representation of dehumanisation and interdependency in these plays, then, asks necessary questions of how we can advance careful and robust considerations of population growth in relation to climate crisis that avoid being engineered by the masculinised biases of neoliberalist, racist, and demopopulationist ideologies.

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Sexual and Gender-Based Violence on Female Bodies: Ecofeminism in Lucy Kirkwood's *Maryland* (2021) and Ellie Kendrick's and RashDash's *Hole* (2018)

Abstract: This chapter puts Lucy Kirkwood's *Maryland* (2021) and Ellie Kendrick's and RashDash's *Hole* (2018) together to keep calling attention to violence against women's bodies and other forms of control or constraints and to focus on increasing alliances and communities of care. Firmly rooted in our intersectional and gender-diverse present, the chapter uses ecology and feminism to consider the plays as ecofeminist and explore the concept of *gyn/ecology* in particular, developed in Mary Daly's book, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978). The present chapter looks at how these plays came about, what they meant to Kirkwood and Kendrick as well as how women's bodies are written and staged in both plays (and beyond) and with what potential implications. Using ecofeminism methodologically, it veers away from focusing on an anthropocentric representation of ecology and instead coins the term *gyn/ecological* theatre to describe the ecofeminist features of the analysed plays.

Introduction

Exploring the repercussions of living in/with a woman's body and responding to the realities of embodiment is at the centre of the two plays that are the subject of analysis in this chapter – *Maryland* (2021) by playwright Lucy Kirkwood and *Hole* (2018) by actor and playwright Ellie Kendrick. In the former, we witness the aftermath of the rape of Mary, as she reports the crime at a Police Station, where we find out that the very policeman processing the case is a rapist himself. In the latter, a group of women who emerge from a hole in the ground are taking up space and addressing dynamics of “being-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey) – in and beyond artistic/fictional spaces – in response to the constricting views and effects of patriarchal discourses, disciplines and practices on their lives and bodies.

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‘Women’ is understood as “people who identify as women” (Kendrick, personal communication). ‘Women’ and ‘female bodies’ also open up to anyone who is impacted by the injustices and processes these plays are preoccupied with.

Bodies, and women’s bodies in particular (see above), are methodologically embedded in the discussion. In fact, the chapter considers that “what happens to the feminist performance body (the body of the artist as well as the body of the critic)” (Solga 12) – the body of the feminist spectator is also included – is central to debates on feminism. I will cover how these plays came about and what they meant to Kirkwood and Kendrick as well as how women’s bodies are written and staged in both plays and with what potential implications. What has happened to my body as I experienced these plays is also a point of departure for this chapter. When I saw *Hole* in December 2018 at the Royal Court Theatre in London, I was expecting a call to be admitted for endometriosis-related keyhole surgery and about to publish the monograph *David Greig’s Holed Theatre: Globalization, Ethics and the Spectator* in early 2019. *Maryland*’s premiere, also at the Royal Court, came with the surfacing of information about a past sexual abuse experience. The body of the critic (to use Solga’s words) is far from being alien to the contents of this chapter and the female bodies’ weaving they engender.

Maryland and *Hole* are united by a number of shared characteristics: their concern with rape (more prominent in *Maryland*); their common howl against male violence and male damaging gendered practices; their ‘anger’ or ‘rage’ (the chapter will look at the complexity of these concepts) towards gendered injustices; the idea of women collectives; the use of the Furies and the notion of chorus; their references to women across history (Biblical references, the Victorians and the suffragettes in *Maryland* and Greek myth including Pandora and Medusa in *Hole*) often with a twist – Kirkwood claims: “My mother told me to always aim for the Adam’s apple” (7); and the fact that both plays premiered at the Jerwood Theatre Upstairs, the smallest and most intimate of the Royal Court stages. Both plays look back in history and at women collectively; less to intervene or revise, and more to profoundly connect women and women across the ages as an embedded organism, in space and time, not only intergenerationally and ancestrally but as people united under the idea of having been subject to constant and ongoing violences.

Intertwined Interpersonal, Structural and Symbolic Violence

Processes of abuse from extreme to subtle are endured by women's bodies, all of which involve complex combinations of different kinds of violence. Besides, the experience of violence varies from person to person. Like Jeanine Hourani and her co-authors, in this chapter, I consider sexual and gender-based violence (which according to current feminist debates may be renamed intersectional-based violence) as “an umbrella term used to cover a spectrum of violence involving a gendered element (Hynes and Cardozo, 2000; Simon-Butler and McSherry, 2018)”, which has “three distinct, albeit interlinked, forms: Interpersonal, structural, and symbolic (Montesanti, 2015)” violence (Hourani, et al. 2021). An example of intersectional-based violence is the way Black women's pain is treated much less seriously in clinical settings and beyond. In the context of post-rape medical examination and critiquing the dismissal of the bodies of women of colour, Kirkwood assigns these lines (*“Because if your bruises don't show like a Caucasian you are not believed as a Caucasian”*) to *“the women of colour in the cast”* (14; emphases original).

Interpersonal violence is “violence that is perpetrated by individuals [...] against family members and intimates, as well as community violence (Montesanti, 2015; World Health Organisation, 2019)” (Hourani, et al. 2021). Structural violence involves “forms of violence that are built into the fabric of society and create and maintain inequalities within and between social groups, including on the basis of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, ability, socioeconomic position, and immigration status (Montesanti and Thurston, 2015)” (Hourani, et al. 2021) and forms of violence that are “upheld by institutions (including government and government institutions) through custom, practice, and law, and manifests in access to both material conditions and power (Jones, 2000)” (Hourani, et al. 2021). Finally, the term “Symbolic Violence”, coined by Pierre Bourdieu, describes

non-physical violence that manifests in power differentials between social groups. We use the term symbolic violence to describe ideologies, words, behaviours and non-verbal communications that produce, reproduce, and legitimise power relations in everyday practices (Montesanti and Thurston, 2015; Thapar-Bjorkert, et al. 2016). Symbolic violence underpins views of men's dominance as part of the ‘natural order’, and conditions that enable prejudice and discrimination and other more visible forms of violence. (Hourani, et al. 2021)

Although *Maryland* highlights aspects of interpersonal (rape and perhaps murder) and structural violence (related to governmental institutions) and *Hole* ad-

dresses structural violence (women being historically denied access to architectures of power) as well as symbolic violence (via literature and gendered behaviour patterns) more prominently, *Maryland* also explores symbolic violence (the linguistic micro-violences of the everyday) and *Hole* is additionally concerned with interpersonal violence (physical violence perpetrated on women). Besides, all three forms of violence are embedded in the practices that affect female bodies in *Maryland* and *Hole*, thus justifying my use of the umbrella term ‘sexual and gender-based violence’.

I am approaching this chapter with and from the perspective of those women’s bodies impacted by this violence and from the input of their lived experience, inspired by the fact that the analysed plays and what they seek to mobilise in their spectators are paradigmatic of an in-the-making female embodiment. This corporeality of care is upheld with fury and passion for the future generations, which can only happen if *every-body* refrains from participation in all violent practices towards women’s bodies.

Ecofeminism in *Maryland* and *Hole*

“1 in 4 women have been raped or sexually assaulted as an adult in England and Wales” (Rape Crisis 2022) and “In the year ending September 2021, 41,332 women were victims of rape, [...] the highest annual figure recorded to date” (Gilder and Clarke 2021) in the United Kingdom. The murders of Sarah Everard in March 2021 and Sabina Nessa in September 2021 revived the ‘anger’ that, as women, we are still unsafe, sorry, unhappy and exhausted, to use Kirkwood’s adjectives at the end of *Maryland*.¹ This chapter puts *Maryland* and *Hole* together to keep calling attention to violence against women’s bodies and other forms of control or constraints and to focus on increasing alliances and communities of care. In this sense, the chapter uses ecology and feminism² to consider the plays as ecofeminist and explore the concept of *gyn/ecology* in particular (developed by Mary Daly).

“Ecology is the study of relationships between organisms and environmental conditions” (Mickey xvii) or “concerned with relationality, with networks of interdependence” (Bottoms, et al. 1). In a similar vein, Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978) argues that ecology is “about the complex

1 I mention these two cases because they have been referred to in the production context of the play.

2 For an example of a comprehensive review of the literature on ecofeminism, please see Greta Gaarb’s *Critical Ecofeminisms* (2017), pages xiv-xvi.

web of interrelations between organisms and the environment” (9). As for feminism, Sam Mickey continues: “feminism focuses on redressing the subordination of women in gendered and sexually differentiated relationships” (Mickey: xvii). In *Le Féminisme ou la mort* (1974), Françoise d'Eaubonne coins the term *eco-féminisme* to talk about the parallels between the patriarchal suppression of both women and the environment, which causes death and environmental disaster (see also concepts of Capitalocene/Anthropocene).³ Indeed, “The combination of ecological and feminist perspectives opens up multiple ways of understanding and responding to the complex dynamics of relationships, discerning the difference between relations of domination and those of partnership, relations that are destructive as well as those that are creative, and everything in between” (Mickey xvii).

Developing on her description of ecology, Daly’s concept of *gyn/ecology* focuses on “the complex web of living/loving relationships of our own kind” (Daly 12) – *gyn* is a Greek prefix that refers to a woman. Although Daly’s work has been highly influential, it has also been ardently criticised. It lacks an intersectional lens and references to non-European sources (see Lorde 1983) and it can be considered essentialist, due to a potential idealism of both women and nature. Besides, in defending a gendered porous self, “she fantasizes an actual transcendent ontology in which self and world are no longer differentiated” (Monagle 337). Indeed, “The point of ecofeminism is thus not to focus on nature and women to the exclusion of everything else. The point is rather to focus on the interconnections and networks of coexistence, which include the entangled categories of race, class, age, ability, religion, nationality, ethnicity, and many others, along with species, gender, and sexuality” (Mickey xvii).

Departing from a re-reading of second-wave feminism but firmly rooted in our intersectional and gender-diverse present, this chapter considers Daly’s ecofeminism, and *gyn/ecology* specifically, a productive framework to discuss *Maryland* and *Hole*. As stated in Daly’s book, ecofeminism is concerned with “the mind/spirit/body pollution inflicted through patriarchal myth and language on all levels” (9). “Patriarchal myth” (including Medusa’s and Pandora’s in *Hole*) and “language” (e.g.: exposure of abrasive small talk in *Maryland*) are appropriated with fury and humour, and through the pieces’ *gyn/ecological* mechanisms (strategies that uphold “the complex web of living/loving relationships of our

3 The Anthropocene is the geological epoch characterised by the preponderance of human impact on planet Earth. The concept has been most notably revised by Jason Moore in *Capitalism in the Web of Life* (2015) and Andreas Malm in *Fossil Capital* (2016), who suggest Capitalocene as a more appropriate term given the lack of homogeneous human impact and capitalism being the determinant factor.

own kind”), the chapter argues, the plays offer space for “creating our Selves, our cosmos” and “hearing the call of the wild, naming our wisdom” (Daly 10–12). Despite the dark undertones of *Maryland*, the chapter argues that through the plays’ exploration of *gyn/ecologies* in women’s relationships and beyond, wider ecologies of care and solidarity may be “dis-cover[ed] [and] de-velop[ed]” (Daly 12), potentially making ‘us’ feel whole again.

Ecology, Theatre and Anthropocentrist Eco-Criticism

While theatre is a form of expression that, by definition, needs an ecosystem in place (see for instance Kershaw 2007: 15–16), the genre has also been connected to ecology critically, most notably since the 2000s onwards.⁴ Celebrated thinkers of critical ecology whose ideas are widely utilised in theatre and performance studies include Una Chaudhuri and Timothy Morton, but perhaps the most influential commentator in the field is Theresa J. May. A notable and often-cited publication is the co-edited volume with Wendy Arons *Readings in Performance and Ecology* (2012). Theatre that responds to ecology/ies “might include illuminating issues of environmental (in)justice; putting an ecological issue at the centre of the action; interpreting ‘community’ to include the non-human and/or the

⁴ Publications in the field include the journal issues *On Ecology* (*Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, 2012), *Environmentalism* (*Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 2012), *On Environment* (*CSPA Quarterly*, 2015), *Performance and Ecology: What Can Theatre Do?* (*Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism*, 2016) and *Critical Theatre Ecologies* (*Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, 2022). Edited books and monographs include *Nature Performed: Environment, Culture and Performance*, edited by Bronislaw Szerszynski, Wallace Heim and Claire Waterton (2003); Gabriella Giannachi and Nigel Stewart’s edited collection *Performing Nature: Explorations in Ecology and the Arts* (2006); Birgit Däwes and Marc Maufort’s *Enacting Nature: Ecocritical Perspectives on Indigenous Performance* (2014); Carl Lavery and Clare Finburgh’s edited volume *Rethinking the Theatre of the Absurd: Ecology, the Environment and the Greening of the Modern Stage* (2015); Bonnie Marranca’s *Ecologies of Theatre: Essays at the Century Turning* (1996); Gabriel Egan’s *Green Shakespeare. From Ecopolitics to Ecocriticism* (2006); Baz Kershaw’s *Theatre Ecology: Environments and Performance Events* (2007); Stephen Bottoms and Matthew Goulish’s *Small Acts of Repair: Performance, Ecology and Goat Island* (2007); Downing Cless’s *Ecology and Environment in European Drama* (2010); Vicky Angelaki’s *Theatre & Environment* (2019); Lisa Woynarski’s *Ecodramaturgies: Theatre, Performance and Climate Change* (2020); and Mohebat Ahmadi’s *Towards an Ecocritical Theatre: Playing the Anthropocene* (2022). This list does not exhaust the literature and has just included some journal issues and books.

land as characters or agents; and (re-)imagining intersections between nature and culture” (Arons and May 181). Engagement with ecology in theatre and performance studies also encompasses the concept of ecodramaturgy. Arons and May describe ecodramaturgy as “theatre and performance making that puts focus on ecological reciprocity and community” (181). “Ecodramaturgy”, as they call it, “refers not only to the sensibilities and strategies employed by playwrights, but also to the critical approaches taken by scholars and directors as they (re)read or (re)stage works to foreground ecological themes” (Arons and May 181) [...] exposing the interconnectedness of the human with the non-human world at microscopic and macroscopic scales” (Arons and May 181). For instance, *Maryland*’s approach to form, spectatorial dynamics and directing can be argued to be ecological and *Hole*, for example, embraces the microscopic world to redefine the perception on bodies and views on the realities of matter.

“Carl Lavery and Clare Finburgh have persuasively discussed the anthropocentrism of mainstream Western drama” (Love 226), and of course, of drama and theatre criticism. Instead of focusing on “the interior lives of dramatic characters”, “theatre critics may focus [...] on ecological aspects including the inherent relationality of theatre, the fact that it always takes place between actors and audiences, [...] the physical presence and fragility of the performer [...], its necessary entanglement in both ‘nature’ and ‘culture’; the explicitly ‘networked quality’ of the stage, in which the human being is always part of a larger assemblage of objects, technologies, and processes; and last, but no means least, the sense in which theatre’s temporality is fabricated, malleable and multi-scalar, able to contest the limited (and limiting) teleological chronologies insisted upon by capitalist modernity” (Lavery 231). However, like Catherine Love, “It is also important to be realistic about how far drama – or any cultural form approaching the subject of climate change [or any other environmental question] – can ever escape anthropocentrism” (235) – the same goes to drama and theatre criticism. And yet, even though what happens to characters and their bodies is central to this chapter, I am not discussing the representation of ecological concerns or the ecological context of productions – see for instance, Catherine Love and Vicky Angelaki’s core discussion of Katie Mitchell’s ecology-related work, including *Ten Billion* (2012) and *2071* (2014) – but discussing the plays themselves as ecologies, as entities that are ecology and suggest ecology, as a formal strategy that unveils a profound politics.

Gyn/Ecological Theatre

Eco-drama and eco-theatre are perhaps the most widely used terms in the field but given my specific focus and approach to ecofeminism in this chapter, I will use the concept of *gyn/ecological* theatre. As stated, Daly's concept of *gyn/ecology* focuses on "the complex web of living/loving relationships of our own kind" (12). Daly argues that the area of medicine which treats women's health and disease, gynaecology, "depends upon fixation and dismemberment" (11). While gynaecology is about dismembering (think about the way the pill separates a body from the process of real menstruation; the unnecessary hysterectomies that are performed annually across the globe; the way gynaecological diseases are treated as isolated from the rest of the body, et cetera), *gyn/ecology* is about *member-ing* and *re-membering* (composing, harmonising and growing new, safe and healthy bodies). *Hole* seems interested in a sense of taking over the world by the female body when gynaecology is actually the discipline that aims at controlling 'our' bodies: "You tried to classify our insides, but we won't allow it" (Kendrick 47).

Indeed, *gyn/ecology* is about creating communities; expanding; producing new limbs that can reach anywhere. *Gyn/ecology* is also about ensuring the ability and right of a body to be unobserved, unshaped, untamed and uncontrolled: "Now we're taking / You / Into / The / HOLE" (Kendrick 43). *Gyn/ecology* is the practice of caring for ourselves and for one another; demanding better medical care for ourselves and our sisters; living for and from our needs and desires; and engaging in exercises that unveil relationality and connection. Taking *Maryland*'s chorus members and *Hole*'s performers as examples, *gyn/ecology* may be interpreted as a practice, for women, of expanding into the universe and living their power; of the possibility of living a healthy life, a life without the myriad practices that allow patterns of behaviour that descend into violence; of living a life without rape and without bodily and environmental ill health.

Perspectives on relationality and intersectionality are two key aspects of the way in which these two plays seem to understand ecology as well as feminism. I have called the following theatrical features and strategies *gyn/ecological* because they contribute to the understanding and formation of a "complex web of relationships of our own kind". *Gyn/ecological* theatre uses all-female (or mostly female) and diverse casts and creative teams; engages creatively with realism (e.g. costume design and utilization of real events in *Maryland*) and is experimental in unusual ways (e.g. use of quantum physics in *Hole*); actively explores the body and bodily experience (including life as a woman, physicality, nudity, use of other arts that utilise the body such as music or instrument play-

ing); is distanced from the anatomization of solid big ideas favouring nuanced conversation and new ways of communicating; and is interested in exploring groups of women as collectives. Interestingly, these collectives are not hermetic. Instead, other bodies are woven into it in myriad ways. Although *gyn/ecological* theatre does not tell the spectator what to think, it includes the spectator's body in the discussion, so the thinking is generated from an embodied and experiential position.

Simultaneously, *gyn/ecological* theatre appears to be a combination of the above aspects with more traditional feminist theatre tropes. This is somewhat encapsulated in Elaine Aston's description of Caryl Churchill's recent work as "eco-socialist-feminist theatre" (*Restaging Feminisms* 12), a phrase that she conceptualises as a "triangulation of socialism, feminism and environmentalism" (*Restaging Feminisms* 12). To come back to the idea that *Maryland* and *Hole* are located at the intersection of new and established feminist features, Kirkwood has called her piece 'agitprop' (Akbar 2021) or waived the rights of the play after the premiere for a period of time, which allowed its circulation and further performances, implying that politics is clearly one of the main impulses behind *Maryland* (and also *Hole*). Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett suggests that "The dissemination of *Maryland* seems to indicate that we might [...] be seeing another wave of resistance" like in the 1970s and 1980s (2021). In fact, we may be returning to earlier feminist theatre's "commitment to telling the stories of silenced and marginalized women, celebrating women's community and sense of connection through group protagonists" (Claycomb 17). Other traditional feminist features that surface at present include addressing the male canon so as to offer counter-hegemonic readings, offering body-positive images of women and also giving strong support to women artists (see Goodman 1993b: 68 qtd. in Aston, *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre* 64), which both *Maryland* and *Hole* exhibit.

***Maryland*: A "Howl" for Wholeness**

Maryland is a short play by British playwright Lucy Kirkwood, written in response to increasing sexual abuse cases in the UK. Although it was written in the two days following the rape and murder of Sabine Nessa (see Akbar 2021), Kirkwood has spoken about *Maryland* having been written long ago in the sense that for many years it has been "a private conversation with [herself]" (Royal Court Theatre 2021). The name of the play may have many resonant readings, the most obvious perhaps being the fact that Maryland is a neighbourhood in Stratford (London), belonging to the London Borough of Newham. The play mentions very specific places and even streets making the idea of rape specif-

ic, locatable and factual – knowing that one of the main problems rape victims face is disbelief. Another possible connotation is the Biblical connection to Virgin Mary and the idea of holiness (and w/‘holeness’ in this chapter’s context) as well as how the narration of women’s lives in the Bible is abundantly gendered.

Maryland was collectively delivered by two companies simultaneously, one of actors (playing two raped women – Mary and Mary 2 – and two police officers) and one of community female chorus members (playing the role of the Furies) and was co-directed by three female artistic directors (Vicky Featherstone, Milli Bhatia and Lucy Morrison). The play has probably been the most sold-out and spoken-about show premiered at the Royal Court in 2021. It even went on a UK tour. Despite the short length (25 minutes), *Maryland* played out in people’s bodies and minds for much longer.

Coinciding with Hannah Greenstreet’s idea that “this new wave of feminist playwrights engages in critical and creative dialogue with realisms” (2021), Kirkwood has claimed that “Every single thing in it is informed by something real” (Akbar 2021). Although the play is preoccupied with sexual violence against women as a whole, Everard and Nessa’s cases are central as *Maryland* contains two young women who have been raped, Mary and Mary 2, the former white and the latter from a minority ethnic background and a rapist policeman. The name of the raped characters is almost identical, pointing out violence against women generally. However, they are perhaps called Mary and Mary 2, to suggest that Nessa’s murder was less covered by the mainstream media because Nessa belongs to a minority ethnic background, yet another example of intersectional violence. Apart from the mentioned context of both Sarah Everard and Sabina Nessa’s murders, the play also contains a reference to the stabbed-to-death sisters in Wembley Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman (see Scene 6) in June 2020. The man who killed them had the deluded idea that killing women would bring him financial success. Officers at the scene (now expelled from the police) were found to take photographs of the dead bodies, which they then shared on WhatsApp. No wonder why Kirkwood said about *Maryland*: “I hesitate to even call it a play when it is simply a howl” (Royal Court Theatre) and claimed that “The gesture of this is to ask why we are not *more* angry” (Akbar 2021; emphasis original). Ticket prices were low to encourage donations to Rape Crisis England and Wales.⁵ The play had both the spirit of a vigil and an unutterable and pervading sense of anger at so much injustice.

⁵ As stated in their website, “Rape Crisis England & Wales is the charity working to end sexual violence and abuse. We provide specialist information and support to all those affected by rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment and all other forms of sexual violence and abuse in England

Crucial elements of the staging included the use of “a singularly chilling sound effect – a cross between a woman’s scream, a metal screech and a shriek of synthesised menace” (Akbar 2021) and a minimal and simple set, with words written in chalk across the floor as demarcation strategy, mainly separating the company of actors (often within the central box) and the Furies beyond the edge at the back (sitting outside the perimeter in chairs). In this efficient and resonant way, the action was happening between communities (chorus and spectators) and being looked at by the community from all points (emphasising the sense of looking and witnessing and therefore perhaps inaction). Here, a “post-Brechtian form of *Verfremdung*” (Hartl 140) is achieved by the use of separation of spaces with chalk on the floor, a specific structure (alternating mostly between the two companies), characters’ names (the raped characters have the same generic name) as well as by the use of the chorus (including the fact that it is a female community chorus, the use of their direct address in the form of questions towards the audience, and the use of the photograph of the same man).⁶

Maryland intersperses scenes of Mary and Mary 2 with the two police agents, one male and one female, and scenes with the Chorus of Furies, although sometimes the Furies participate in scenes unallocated to them. The Chorus of Furies is composed by +18 people who identify as women from the community. The Royal Court created four companies of Furies, who played their role script-in-hand for two-to-three days each during the Royal Court run. Some of the chorus members had professional theatrical experience. The chorus members were paid for their time and work. The chorus of Furies creates a liminal space between action and inaction (they do not engage with narrated action by the other company), the real and the fictional, the actors and the community, the play and the spectators. Due to their position and their condition of being female whilst being seen on stage, the collective of women’s bodies from the community on stage *gyn/ecologically* interpellates audience members’ bodies in distinct ways, due to its mirror effect and the fact that ‘they’ (the Furies) *are* ‘them’ (spectators), as members of the community but also as their daughters, sisters, cousins, friends and so on. The rotation of the company of Furies highlights the idea of cyclical and ongoing violence and the idea that violence is experienced by so many people, by so many women.

The play is set in different spaces including a police station and a carpark and it revolves around the circumstances surrounding a series of rape cases.

and Wales. We are also the membership organisation for 39 Rape Crisis centres. Together, we aim to educate, influence and make change” (2022).

⁶ There is no scope in this chapter to discuss Brechtian dialectics at length. Anja Hart’s book’s introduction (see Works Cited) is an excellent way to start.

The play's darkly humorous speech patterns seriously call attention to the gendered violence of everyday language. The empty, non-sensical small talk exhibited by the police officers tries to diffuse the tension but makes things worse as it only reinforces the avoidance of looking at violent acts for what they are, extremely grave offences that alter people's lives, that is, if they manage to stay alive. Another terrifying conversation, between DC Moody (the male police officer/rapist) and the Marys involves cars, the two owned by Moody in particular. The mentioning of the two cars is highly sinister as, for instance, two cars were used in Everard's murder.

Scene 1 and 2 read as some sort of exposition scenes. In Scene 1, we are in the morning after the first two rapes happened. Mary and Mary 2 arrive at the (Police) station, where they are received by DC Moody and have the conversation referred to above. In Scene 2, the Furies and the audience (invited by the Furies), rate from 1 to 5 a series of statements stated by the Furies, 1 being "disagree strongly" and 5 being "agree strongly". The first statement is "My environment is important to me" (Kirkwood 5). Scene 3 takes us back to the Station. The two Marys speak to a policewoman, who says her name is "DC Eddowes but you can call me Mary if you want" (Kirkwood 5), the implication of which being that 'we' are all Mary and are all inextricably interconnected and 'interaffected' (this includes DC Moody's mother, whom we learn is also called Mary). Eddowes takes pictures of Mary's bruises and shows Mary 2 nine faces of potential assailants on the computer. Simultaneously, the Furies hold the photograph of an identical computer-generated man. The juxtaposition of the nine different men shown on the computer and the same man shown by the Furies problematises the idea of the identity of the rapist. The further blurring of sameness and difference is also reflected in the Marys and the use of 'Mary'. Furthermore, in Scene 3, Mary and Mary 2 start to look like the same person. For instance, having finished with the photographs of her body being taken, Mary sits in front of a computer ID room, and then the text refers straightaway to Mary 2. In Scene 4, followed by her questions which continue from Scene 2, the Furies use thumbs-up for 'yes' and thumbs-down for 'no' and invite audience members to do the same. The questions incrementally contribute to the play's ascending tension. In Scene 5, back at the station, DC Moody listens to Mary talking about the rapist's scar in the head (as Mary 2 does in Scene 3), so the play suggests that the rapist may well be the policeman. In the same scene, Mary talks to DC Moody about hats when the remark about hats was made by Mary 2 confirming again perhaps that Mary and Mary 2 are the same person (and simultaneously, that they have been raped by the same man). When Mary tells Moody about the hat and the scar, he deflects from it by bringing up the subject of haircuts. After this, Mary 2 enters and to continue with the constant tone of dismissal

and humiliation, Moody talks to them with a childish tone: “Anyone need a wee?” (Kirkwood 8).

In Scene 6, the Furies spell out a series of increasingly shocking statements. This time, the Furies add a shrug for ‘don’t care’ and continue with the same dynamics. In Scene 7, we go back to the carpark. DC Eddowes asks them what they are up to the next day completely trivialising the experience they have just gone through. The small chat no longer holds, Mary snaps and says she will go to Wilko to buy a breadknife, then slide it into the belly of the first man she finds with a y-shape scar on his forehead, and then go and buy some chicken wings. In Scene 8, the numbers that precede the Furies’ statements start to raise exponentially because, for one, this is what violence does to our minds: perhaps one thinks of probabilities and scenarios. The violence encoded in the statements increases as we are getting closer to the moment of the rapes at the end. One statement reminds us that violence towards women starts from a young age and that a crucial intervention must be education: “I regularly pass a group of teenage boys who pay me compliments and spit on me” (Kirkwood 10). Scene 9, called “The Most Frightening Thing of All”, is the final scene of the play. Mary decides she will go to the petrol station Esso across the park to buy some snacks against Mary 2’s advice not to. It is implied that she does get raped again. When Mary 2 gets in the car to be taken home, DC Moody takes off his hat to reveal his y-shaped scar. Mary, in shock, finds out that Moody is her assailant, who is about to rape her again.

At the end of the play, in a shattering direct address, the Furies say: “we would like to know / What it will take / What fresh hell do you need? / Before you are as angry as we are?” (Kirkwood 18). While I think *Hole* is in a different stage in the process of anger, as I will discuss, there is no denying that *Maryland* is an angry play. The play tries to resist circularity by attempting to focus on the aftermath of rape, but the ending brings two more rapes. The form of the play suggests that despite the need (and the hope) for an end to violence, the cycle of violence continues. At the end, there is no curtain call and the Furies look at spectators in the eye. The audience are left with the feeling of the piece, with the awareness that assaults on women are happening right now.

***Hole*: Wholeness in ‘Our’ Terms**

Ellie Kendrick’s 60-minute play *Hole* premiered at the Royal Court Theatre in 2018 as part of the Jerwood New Playwrights programme. *Hole* is Kendrick’s first produced play and was directed by two of the members of the award-winning physical theatre company RashDash, Abbi Greenland and Helen Goalen.

The physical presence of bodies on stage (six female bodies in total) is highlighted in this production through dancing, singing, nakedness, varied uses of stage and other spaces, live instrument playing and so on. What ‘happens’ in this play is much more difficult to delineate than in *Maryland* partly because it is about one main event unfolding, that is, women breaking free, taking space and in command. In tune with later concerns by the same playwright, in Ellie Kendrick Subculture Substage’s *Friction*, which featured at *The Living Newspaper Edition 4* (Royal Court, 2021), a young female character tells a younger one who is insecure: “I want you to feel safe and round and whole and loved in your body, each of your cells is holy, every hair follicle”.⁷ Of course, the skin is the largest organ in the body and thoroughly holed but here the pun is not unintended – and through the term *holy*, Kendrick’s word choice also connects with Mary and *Maryland*.

The devising processes that took place during the workshopping and rehearsal stages had a great impact on the script eventually used and, of course, the staging of the punk-glam-cabaret-like piece. In-house associate artistic director Lucy Morrison worked with Kendrick on the development of the script as a dramaturg, and Kendrick followed closely the rehearsal process whilst adamant about the team’s artistic freedom. The same reason accounts for including few stage directions. Kendrick’s own experience as performer imbues her approach to writing: “My writing for theatre has always been informed by my experience as a performer. The knowledge of the living bodies on stage that speak the words” (personal communication).

Kendrick’s approach to (female) collective creation, process and devising⁸ corroborates a *gyn/ecological* approach. Kendrick has mentioned that bodies and movement are crucial in this piece (see personal communication), which is explored in *Hole*’s staging and the forms of expression chosen in the staging. This mirrors a feminism that is moving, transforming and that should be everywhere. The play is interspersed with songs and music and dancing, which connects with the riotous and joyous mood the play generates. The use of songs was inspired by Kendrick’s participation as an actor in Martin Crimp’s *In the Republic of Happiness* (see personal communication). Cécile Trémolières’s set design (use of asymmetry, several stage levels, imbalance, disrupting lines) suggests the undoing of established forms and geometries, which contrasts with the stability of

⁷ I took a note of this line as I was watching this performance live online.

⁸ Women’s collective creation in the UK and beyond has a long-standing history. See, for instance, Kathryn Mederos Syssoyeva and Scott Proudfit’s *Women, Collective Creation, and Devised Performance: The Rise of Women Theatre Artists in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (2016).

the round hole shape. The use of lighting (an astonishing palette of violets, pinks, blues, greens and oranges which at times seemed a subtle representation of the cosmos itself) put women's bodies right in the stars in a confounded manner. The female performers are simultaneously creating their cosmos, and no one will stop them. Suggesting theatre itself as ecology and ecofeminist, the freedom and openness with which the creative work was approached and rendered on stage is vital towards the very themes it covers.

In *Hole*, we witness six female performers speaking the voices of several women, including Woman 1, Woman 2 and Woman 3. They are a female intersectional cast. For instance, there are three Black performers and an older performer to name a few identity traits. They talk about their experience; try to give a performance lecture; attempt to re-tell myths; address 'him' as a collective of women who are expanding and warns 'him' to leave them alone. It is then slightly awkward to call them 'characters' partly because Kendrick herself uses the word "speakers" (personal communication), which apart from suggesting alliances with post-dramatic theatre, may suggest the idea of a springboard for repressed and scorned voices to be heard. In fact, 'listening' is key in *Hole*. The play insists on listening (and critiques looking, particularly being looked at as a woman's body generally and as a female body on stage). In sum, the play is an attack on judgmental gendered perception. The play begins and ends emphasising listening which may suggest circularity. Circularity, in turn, may be a reference to the usually circular hole. The performers speak, sing, dance, come out of, get sucked into, appear behind or trespass holes on stage. Even one piece of costume was fully holed, projecting light outwards, which in my view toys with the idea of the spectator rather than the performers being looked at and the projecting of rage outwards, as I will explain.

After we've been introduced to most performers, echoing Sarah Kane's 4.48's *Psychosis*, there is a woman coming out of an underground hatch. She tries to escape the spotlight, but it follows her, so she goes back to the hatch (note that women are coming from the ground, from below, which may connect them equally to grassroots movements as well as the Earth as a whole). Then she cannot come back up, but in the end, a collective of women finally break out, and they are not coming back in: "You try being buried in a hole / For two hundred thousand years" (Kendrick 40). They are expanding and claim that the structures of men cannot hold them: "We speak of our holes. / We reject your definition of holes. / We reject your whole framework" (Kendrick 19). They are drilling into the hole (and whole), quite literally. One song goes: "Drill, baby, drill" (Kendrick 24–25). As this idea of being big and becoming bigger is so relevant in the play, I would argue that this is a response to continuously being belittled (ignored, objectified, marginalized, unheard, abused, et cetera) as women.

Hole “was written pre my awareness of ‘MeToo’”, Kendrick says, “and the popularisation of that term” (personal communication). With *Hole*, Kendrick “was thinking about tracking notions and narratives of power to their source – what myths and stories of power do we see around us in culture, language, theatre, science?” (personal communication). Simultaneously, she notes “the narrative of gender in the West” as well as “the narrative of ‘fighting back’” and getting power back being “flawed and troubled”, being “infected with the same troubling language” as the above narratives of power. This is why at times throughout the text, when narratives are attempted to be rewritten from the female body perspective, they also sometimes falter. When she tells the stories of Pandora and Medusa reading into her own perspectives as women, I think there is a simultaneous reclamation of Pandora and Medusa as wronged sisters, and an acknowledgement of the difficulty of critiquing within language, culture and narrative, all of which have historically ‘compressed’ and mis and underrepresented women.

Some reviews of *Hole* doubted its political potential: “in its fury, it leaves little room for doubt, argument or internal challenge” (Billington). Despite the subtitle of Aleks Sierz’s review “Anger Is Not Quite Enough”, he said that *Hole* gave “the audience the experience of a truly deep sense of rage”. Kendrick claims: “I had started to notice this narrative in a lot of mainstream feminist discourse that for equality to happen all women need is to be more powerful and ferocious and eaten up by rage. I found this troubling” (personal communication). Instead of being eaten up, women eat, grow, get bigger and grow more and more cells (see Kendrick 18) in *Hole*. ‘We’ are absorbing specific people and behaviours into that Black hole we have specially created. This idea of taking over is present in other contemporary feminist plays such as Alice Birch’s *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again* (2014): “‘dismantle the monetary system [...] overthrow the government [...] take over the airwaves, the televisions, the Internet, etcetera’ and ‘eradicate all men’” (100) and yet, it does not work out: “It failed. The whole world failed at it” (75).

Taking note that acknowledging and processing rage is a positive and healthy strategy: “Rage can be a powerful fuel for change, but it isn’t an end point” (personal communication), a second reading of rage is that *Hole* engages with outrage. *Hole* uses fury and the furies (a potential reading of the six women performers), but it is not furious (it is in fact quite celebratory). It recognises a space for anger, but it is *not* simply ‘angry’. It repeatedly uses the word ‘rage’ but instead of being about ‘rage’, it acknowledges the transformative power of rage. Instead of holding rage inside, they shift their (and women’s) rage outward.

Instead of reading this (that ‘we’ will eradicate men, that we are enraged) as radical and angry feminist claims, I read them in the light of the following state-

ments in Sarah Ahmed's book *Living a Feminist Life* – besides, like *Maryland, Hole* is inviting and open to dialogue: “We have space at our table” (23). Ahmed argues that feminism involves “the dynamism of making connections” (4) and she states that “Feminism needs to be everywhere” (4). The central premise of the book seems ecological in this sense: “A central position grounding ecofeminism is the belief that values, notions of reality, and social practices are related, and that forms of oppression and domination, however historically and culturally distinct, are interlocked and enmeshed” (Ahmed 1). And this is precisely a key criticism pervasive in *Hole*. Understanding our lives more ecologically, in an entwined manner, is crucial for the feminism we need to be nurturing.

There is a crucial dichotomy at the heart of *Hole*, between ‘big’ and ‘small’. Kendrick describes ‘big’ in the text’s notes as “‘people who occupy their bodies in space in a way that feels radical and powerful’” (n.p 2018), reclaiming our birthright to be the body we want to be. In *Hole*, the group of women are getting bigger and bigger, and, I would argue, the male (the censor, the patriarch, the writer, the scientist, the teacher, the doctor, the family member, the historian, the politician, the passenger, the partner, the policeman, the judge, the rapist, the passer-by and even the spectator) watching, trying to make women invisible, silenced and of course, “compressed” (Kendrick, personal communication), getting smaller. This is made explicit in the staging of the play. The practice of silencing reveals itself when a hole opens on the stage floor and makes the speaking performer disappear or when we hear a kind of talent show buzzer that interrupts the performers’ speech. Oftentimes, the practice of silencing is subtle via, for instance, not being believed, not being duly listened to. Kendrick claims that “There was no particular context for the play outside of my experience as a female performer, knowing many women who have had violences done to them and being frustrated by the lack of words available to express this [...] without being responded to with some form of scorn” (personal communication).

The fact that Kendrick is critical of the idea of power itself does not put in jeopardy the power of the play itself and the play’s ‘powerful’ comment on male violence. *Hole* is consistently concerned with rape (see Women 2’s lines near the play’s opening: “I’m walking down the street at night and it’s dark and there’s a man –” [11]). When trying to disclose the rape experience, she repeats it as the sentence becomes shorter and the spotlight that allows the audience to see her becomes smaller. Here language, movement and light design are working in unison to convey the disbelief and silencing women experience when they try to speak up about gendered violence. When testifying or retelling rape in most contexts, ‘our’ interlocutors’ often cold questioning makes ‘us’ feel smaller and feel that we would rather be sucked into a hole. The second explicit connec-

tion to *Maryland* occurs when Woman 3 tells the rape story of Medusa (see Kendrick 12).

Part of *Hole*'s gyn/ecological contestation through language and body attitude is done via the incessant parallels generated between celestial and female bodies⁹ as well as the play's formal experimentation with the use of physics. For instance, the use of 'implode' in "I need to tell you or I am going to implode" (Kendrick 9), while highlighting the emotions we constantly hold inside, equates bodies with stars (which also explode or fade away, depending on their weight). At the end of the initial scene, Woman 1 is sucked into a hole (stage trap) that opens below her. This connects this Woman's body to a supernova, which as she explains before, undergoes an explosion causing the star to collapse into a Black hole. The play also draws on quantum physics: "Looking is an act / Things know when you're looking" (Kendrick 35); "Elementary particles don't like being watched. / The fabric of the universe will not be caught"; "When you try to measure them they split themselves and scatter. / Try to track the path of a particle" (Kendrick 35). Kendrick experimentally uses physics to probably suggest that we are not going to be looked at on anyone's (particularly patriarchal) terms, measured, controlled or caught. The women collective expanding and forming an infinite density as one same thing is compared to the astrophysics concept of singularity: "We are the same thing taking over" and "WE'RE LINKING UP. WE'RE FORMING ONE / WE'RE A SUPERMASSIVE BLACK HOLE, QUEEN" (Kendrick 46), which is key to the chapter's ecofeminist focus.

As signalled by Kendrick's "Female body big bang" (personal communication), the body is at the centre of the play's interest. To rewrite from itself, to create it by communing with other female bodies, to reinvent it by allowing its expansion, to renew it by updating its relations, to respect it by asserting its desires, to reinstate it by highlighting its wisdom, to redefine it by addressing what it does not want; to awaken it by generating ecological love (ecological love acknowledges that we are all the same thing).

I read 'coming out of the hole', 'growth' and 'expansion' as a political statement as well as a 'glorious' celebration of 'our' excess and excesses, taking into account that 'ours' is a history of containment: of stories told in certain ways, of various violences, of pain, of cyclical organ loss (the uterus walls are shed with each menstruation), of being kept in 'the house' and assigned certain activities and behaviours as well as roles, of bodily processes, sexuality and desire, et cetera: "Your structures cannot hold me" (Kendrick 18), reads *Hole*. *Hole* is about our need for one another and every single entity on this planet, including the

9 A strategy also beautifully illuminated by Mojisola Adebayo's play *Stars* from 2019.

inanimate. *Hole* places a lot of emphasis on the importance of dancing and singing, of self and collective creative expression. Boundary transgression (the one Pandora was not allowed to cross, the one ‘we’ are constantly forbidden to cross) is beautifully realised on stage in many ways. One of the songs, “Freedom”, in one of the albums that inspired the play, Beyoncé’s video album *Lemonade*, says: “I’m a riot, I’m a riot through your borders”. We are creative and caring and loving and vulnerable and sensual and, like the Furies in *Maryland* (‘us’), ‘we’ want to stop living in fear. In *Hole*, “We are making a space that’s ours” (Kendrick 23). We are out of the hole, and we will stay out, radiant as we are.¹⁰

Final Note

I acknowledge that instead of ‘green’ theatre (or ‘green’ criticism), this is theatre green with anger (*Maryland* in a much more rotund manner) and that the concepts of ecology, ecofeminism and *gyn/ecology* as applied here, despite the limitations, have been used as productive frameworks to offer readings of *Maryland* and *Hole*. These two plays’ innovative formal features invite a cosmological, embodied ecofeminism, one that transgresses formal boundaries, blurs subjects across and beyond the stage, re-invents theatre communities, undoes the notion of the individual and individual struggle, reinvigorates the concept of care, re-writes emotions, disrupts male structures and strictures, invites healing, allows the expression of communal anger as well as possible hopeful futures, speaks to contemporary feminist intersectional concerns and reinserts the body at the heart of politics. Both plays ask for the rewiring of perception towards women’s bodies. A sense of women’s bodies spills over the representation of women’s bodies in both plays and *gyn/ecologically* interweaves bodies and the world as a whole.

I hope not only the ‘eco’ aspects of these plays stay with those who encountered them somehow, but also their ‘echo’. This is this chapter’s final note: every word, every action, every look is important. The ‘subtle’ violences of the every-

¹⁰ *Hole* draws on and mirrors some quantum physics principles (it is an experiment in its own right I would say) and does clearly compare some of the processes the women collective goes through with astrophysical phenomena, so in the spirit of trying not to impose some order (what the male and patriarchal gazing and linear thinking does to women, and that the play ardently critiques), I have tried to honour physics as much as possible. But of course, as in chaos theory, I hope you will find some underlying patterns that will illuminate the readings of the plays.

day are connected to major violent acts. Both plays are in different degrees and manner angry with the sources of patriarchal and institutional power and hungry for expressive, joyful, healthy and safe bodies. Although ‘we’ still live in ‘Maryland’, we are also coming out of the ‘hole’. As Vicky Featherstone claims in relation to *Maryland*, “There is order. There is hope” (Royal Court Theatre 2021). ‘We’ don’t want to dream about the day oppression and sexual and gender abuse will be wiped out. ‘We’ will eat up the rapists, now, together, because, like the characters in *Hole*, we are expanding, we are getting bigger, we are taking over the universe. Female big bang (see Kendrick, personal communication). United in hope, ‘we’ say and ‘we’ listen: no more Marys.¹¹

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Eleanor Stewart

Lucy Prebble's *Enron* (2009): The Financial Crisis as Theatrical Spectacle in the Era of Liquid Modernity

Abstract: Women playwrights experienced a new visibility at the end of the first decade of the 21st century on both subsidised and commercial stages. Although branded as part of the new wave of diverse “female dramatists,” Lucy Prebble firmly believes that women writers should not be restricted to certain subjects because of their gender. First performed at the Royal Court in 2009, *Enron* tackles the world of unregulated, global capitalism and offers a new take on the British state-of-the-nation genre by drawing on the story of the downfall of the American energy corporation. However, this article explores the ways in which Prebble goes beyond the naturalistic tradition. The strikingly imaginative dramaturgy based on song, dance, puppetry and multi-media projections produces a hybrid form, oscillating between comedy, musical, tragedy and morality fable. As well as demonstrating how the visual effects render the indecipherable world of neo-liberalism more accessible, the article considers the theatrical and meta-theatrical spectacle as a reflection of the artifice at the heart of *Enron*. It also draws attention to the way in which the dramatist offers a biting satire of corporate greed whilst simultaneously conveying the exhilarating but disorderly atmosphere of the board room. Finally, to facilitate a better understanding of Prebble's work, the chapter looks closely at the parallels between the play's aesthetics and Zygmunt Bauman's metaphor of “liquid modernity” used to convey the uncertain, transient nature of the modern human condition, brought about by the fluid, unstable nature of post-industrial capitalism.

Introduction

In 1997, Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge's *Rage and Reason* celebrated the achievements of female dramatists but also underlined the continued gender imbalance in the world of theatre. Citing Caryl Churchill, Pam Gems, Sarah Daniels, Timberlake Wertenbaker and Sarah Kane, the authors claimed that “[w]omen playwrights have broadened the agenda of British drama. Both the form and content of their work have pushed the boundaries of what it is possible to show and tell on stage [...]” (Stephenson and Langbridge, Introduction ix). Whilst the Royal Court has long been known for supporting women playwrights,

the authors acknowledged that female dramatists were still woefully under-represented in mainstream theatre. A survey in the mid-nineties had indicated that only 20 percent of productions on mainstream stages were by women. As Sarah Daniels pointed out, the Royal National Theatre “does have the word ‘national’ in the title – so where is half the population?” (Stephenson and Langbridge 2)

Fast-forward to the noughties. In 2008, Rebecca Lenkiewicz’s *Her Naked Skin* was the first original play by a woman to be produced on the National Theatre’s Olivier stage, its main auditorium. In 2010, the Globe Theatre produced its first play by a female playwright – Nell Leyshon’s *Bedlam*. These events heralded the first signs of a new visibility for women playwrights on the subsidised stage but also in the commercial theatre. Their works reflected the keen interest of contemporary female playwrights in writing epic dramas. Lucy Prebble’s *Enron* (Minerva Theatre, Chichester; Royal Court, 2009; Noel Coward Theatre, 2010), the object of this article, tackled a moment of crisis in America which revealed the cracks in neoliberal capitalism and Laura Wade’s *Posh* (Royal Court, 2010; Duke of York’s, 2012) launched a scathing attack on Britain’s political establishment. Broadcasters and critics were quick to categorize this generation collectively as the “new wave of women dramatists.” In his interview with Lucy Prebble in *The Observer*, Tim Adams described her as part of “a vanguard of young women playwrights” (Adams). Rejecting the idea of being part of a movement, Prebble still bemoaned the continuing gender imbalance on the main stages of national institutions such as the National Theatre, the Globe and the RSC, but could not easily explain the relative lack of visibility of works by women: “And it is scandalous, [...] because you are getting such a one-eyed view of the world in your art [...]” (quoted in Adams).

In 2010, BBC Radio 4’s flagship arts programme *Front Row* interviewed Lucy Prebble, Polly Stenham, Chloe Moss, Lucy Kirkwood, Ella Hickson and Alia Bano, presenting them as “six of Britain’s promising young playwrights.” They all resented being pigeonholed as female dramatists and insisted that their gender was irrelevant to what they write about. According to Prebble, the label ‘woman writer’ “propagates a phase we should be over now” and Stenham stressed the importance of “mental androgyny.” However, they all acknowledged that the debate about their gender was still an issue, mainly due to the assumption that women write best about emotions, about personal issues often based on their own experiences. The 2010s, just like the first decade of the century, would confirm otherwise. By 2013, the proportion of plays performed written by female playwrights had risen to over 30 per cent and many tackled global issues. In 2016, Lucy Kirkwood’s eco-drama *The Children* dealt with nuclear disaster and Ella Hickson’s *Oil* confronted the world’s dependency on the industry. In the same year, arts critic Mark Lawson was asking in *The Guardian* “Is 2016 the

year of the female playwright”?¹ There is no doubt then that new women writers have claimed a space for themselves on the British stage, broken down boundaries and gained a new visibility, writing on themes ranging from the environment to slavery, technology, war and the economy.

While many critics have acknowledged the contribution of women writers to what David Edgar has described as a “golden age of playwriting” (Judith E. Wilson annual lecture, Cambridge University, 2019), Aleks Sierz alleged that many playwrights of this new wave are less experimental with form than those of the 1980s. However, he cited Prebble (along with Lucy Kirkwood, Alice Birch and Ella Hickson) as an example of a dramatist “not averse to experiment,” who goes beyond the naturalistic tradition (Sierz 2011). In her 2017 book, Sarah Grochala identifies examples of alternative dramaturgies in British theatre (agit-prop, community theatre, verbatim theatre...) which, throughout the 20th century, contested the model of “serious”, political theatre, dominant since the 19th century. Grochala argues that, following in this tradition of innovative playwriting practices, contemporary political plays offer new dramaturgical forms to express the fluid, uncertain character of post-industrial, 21st century capitalist society which is in a permanent state of flux. According to Grochala, the disruption of conventional dramatic aesthetics reflects what sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has termed the “liquid state of modernity.” This article analyses Lucy Prebble's *Enron* and the inventive dramaturgy used by the playwright to explore one of the most famous financial scandals of recent times affecting an international corporation. It will also draw on certain passages of the play to demonstrate the parallels with Bauman's concept of liquid modernity.

Prebble's conviction that no subjects are inaccessible to women (“I hate to be told that somewhere is out of bounds,” quoted in Adams) is resolutely expressed in *Enron*. Writing in the *Financial Times*, she confessed her fascination for the corporate world: “Certainly when the company fell, I was bewitched by the magnitude, the complexity, the people. Those who seek positions of great power are always interesting. [...] I decided against corporate life but was still inexplicably drawn to it” (Prebble 2010). The play is an account of the spectacular rise and fall of the American energy company, and in particular of its CEO Jeffrey Skilling. It explores the interplay between three key figures – chairman Kenneth Lay, Jeffrey Skilling (CEO) and Andy Fastow (Chief Finance Officer) and covers events between 1992 and 2006, from the years of dizzying success, to the period

¹ See also “Angry young women: the new generation of young female dramatists.” *The Daily Telegraph*, 8 May, 2012 and “Meet Britain's new generation of fearless young female playwrights.” *The Observer*, 21 November, 2015.

of crisis, the fraudulent attempt at cover-ups, to the exposure of the fraud, the trial and ultimate imprisonment of Skilling.

Although Prebble says she did not set out to write a “story of our times” (quoted in Adams), she was aware that, as she was rewriting drafts of the 2001 Enron story, other versions of it were being played out every evening on the UK news, creating parallels between the Enron scandal and the 2008 global financial crisis. By the time of the play’s first performance, the national and international context contributed to it being received as a political play, regardless of the dramatist’s initial intentions. The presence of Jeffrey Skilling’s daughter acts as a playful counterpoint to Skilling’s dogged belief in a new virtual economy and would have reflected the incredulous attitude of the British public. The character first appears via a voice-over in a scene entitled “A Memory” in which she is learning to count. Skilling’s alienation from his daughter is embodied visually by the physical distance between them on the stage (she “*appears somewhere high up, not close to him*” [81] before fading “*into the dark*” [82]).² The child’s naive request to her father “Show me the money” (81) highlights the virtual aspect of financial capitalism and the public’s frustration with its intangibility. When she appears again as a figment of her father’s imagination, she seems equally ephemeral, blowing “*bubbles somewhere on stage*” (115). As she disappears, the bubbles left behind evoke Enron’s vulnerability, a warning of the capitalistic bubble which is about to burst. Her childlike repetition of “why”, which punctuates her father’s attempts to explain the rules of neoliberal finance, would have struck a chord with the national mood of incomprehension and confusion. In 2009, the backdrop of the recession and the loss of trust in business, described by Prebble as the collapse of “a system of belief” (quoted in Adams), led to the play being perceived as an expression of the domestic and global situation, and as a comment on the fragility of the marketplace. The phrase promoting the play “There was a warning and its name was Enron” established the link between the 2001 Enron scandal and the global crisis a few years later. In such a context, it is not difficult to imagine the resonances *Enron* would have had for audiences in Britain, with the collapse of Enron being seen as a forewarning of the crash of the global financial markets in the developed world.³

² 2009 Methuen edition of the play. All future quotations refer to this edition.

³ According to Vicky Angelaki: “Enron occupied a strange territory of being both reality and metaphor; both self-referential, about a major corporate collapse, and representing a historical moment, that, in 2009, provided a vehicle through which to reflect on the causes and effects of the 2008 recession that was all too recent. If reflecting on the present through current affairs was

Reflecting on contemporary events to make sense of national concerns characterizes the British state-of-the-nation play. However, Prebble reflects on the state of the nation by drawing on recent history across the Atlantic. She thus pushes the boundaries of the genre to offer us what Joshua Abrams has described as “more state-of-the-world drama” (14), a fitting choice given the increasingly interconnectedness of the world’s economies and the far-reaching consequences of the neoliberal crisis. In a recent interview Prebble asserted: “To write a good play you need to identify a gap between what you see in the world and what is truthfully represented on stage” and “rush to fill it” (Kellaway 2020). How does she shed light on the Enron scandal and tell the story theatrically? We know that she saw the rise and fall of Enron in inherently dramatic terms, as “that most theatrical of entities, just a game, an illusion, a system of belief” (Adams 2009). Prebble revealed in another interview that her aim “was to show the theatricality of business and the illusions on which it thrives” (Billington, 2009). By turning it into an extravagant, fast-paced, visual and musical spectacle using theatrical forms which reflect its very subject matter, the playwright made the indecipherable world of business accessible to theatre audiences:⁴

The amorphous mass that is “business” seemed too large, too impenetrable, too dull a subject for drama. But character and hubris, spectacle and illusion; those things are the stuff of theatre and Enron had plenty of those. My concern has always been to create a play about Enron that could appeal to everyone. (Prebble 2010)

Of course, Prebble is not the first British dramatist to engage with capitalism. Since George Bernard Shaw with *Major Barbara* (1905), playwrights have questioned the ethics of free-market capitalism. In the same year, Harley Granville Barker’s *The Voysey Inheritance* dealt with fraud within a family legal business, while other early 20th century works such as John G. Galsworthy’s *Strife* (1909) and D. H. Lawrence’s *The Daughter-in-Law* (written 1912) are part of a body of plays which examine conflict between labour and capital. In the post-war period, J. B. Priestley’s *An Inspector Calls* (first performed in Britain in 1946) offers a critique of capitalism. Towards the end of the 20th century, dramatists turned more

too painful, then refracting the reference to the recent past and to an event that served as a precursor allowed for some critical distance, as well as humour” (Angelaki 2017, 227).

⁴ As Mark O’Thomas has pointed out, both Lucy Prebble’s *Enron* and David Hare’s *The Power of Yes* “attest to theatre’s artistic engagement with contemporary politics and its desire to facilitate a more sophisticated debate within the public realm around the complex workings [...] and the market practices of the corporate world” (135).

specifically to neoliberalism: Churchill's *Serious Money* (1987), which can be considered a precursor to *Enron*, uses non-naturalistic theatrical forms, song and dance to satirize Thatcherite economics and the deregulation of the stock exchange, whilst *Shopping and Fucking* (1996) by Mark Ravenhill explores the consumerism at the heart of British society. David Hare's verbatim play *The Permanent Way* (2003) offered a clear indictment of the privatization of the railways before his piece of documentary theatre *The Power of Yes* (2009) attempted, in a very different style from *Enron*, to make sense of the 2008 banking crisis.

Enron is a hybrid play which oscillates between a naturalistic and non-naturalistic style, juxtaposing sequences of musical theatre with scenes of realist drama. Inspired by real events, Prebble's play was based on two years of carefully documented research. Projections of news reels anchor the story in the period, connecting it to the wider political and economic context. Videos evoke the heady atmosphere of the 1990s: "*We see projections of the joys and stability of the 1990s. Bill Clinton, the break-up of the Soviet Union, Microsoft, the Internet and the rise of home computer and Intel [...]*" (Prebble, *Enron* 9). There is footage of the election of Bush (76) whilst the public announcement of Enron's bankruptcy is set against footage of the September 11 terrorist attacks (98). However, in her author's note, Prebble reminds us that the final result is not an exact representation of events. The opening scene, with its striking combination of realistic devices (snippets from Enron commercials and the voice-over from Jeffrey Skilling) and non-realistic, metaphorical elements (three blind business men with heads of mice), sets the tone for the rest of the play. From the outset, the lawyer's direct address reminds the audience that they are in a theatre and that this is just one version of the truth: "Now as a lawyer I choose my words carefully. So when we tell you this story, you should know it could never be exactly what happened. But we're gonna put it together and sell it to you as the truth" (Prologue). His comment serves as a metaphor for the Enron story – just as the audience is invited to trust in Prebble's version, so Enron's initial success relied on its investors' and shareholders' belief in the company and a willingness to 'buy' the story they were being sold. Both theatre spectator and Enron's stakeholders have to suspend their disbelief in the 'performance.' The address creates a parallel between the lawyer in the court presenting his interpretation of events and the dramatist's fictionalized version of the truth. In the context of the Enron story, this meta-theatrical device highlights the illusion of corporate success.⁵

5 Angelaki describes Skilling's meteoric rise as "a reflection of the business narrative and the readiness with which unrealistic targets are presented to the masses as plausible [...]" (231).

One example of Prebble's non-naturalistic aesthetic is the use of split scenes, a technique borrowed from film and television. Prebble's stage directions require a set designed on different levels, enabling simultaneous events to be portrayed across different areas of the performance space. Split scenes allow the dramatist to move the action forward quickly but also to emphasize contrasting business ethics. The macho banter in the gym in Act 1, scene 5 reveals Skilling's ruthless, virtual vision of business, whilst above Claudia Roe expresses her concerns to Chairman Ken Lay about the new direction the company is taking. The second split scene has a foreshadowing effect: unsuspecting executives from the millennium "*party above*" (55), hitherto not complicit in the corruption, celebrate the coming of the new century, whilst Fastow below in his lair creates the raptors – symbols of the fake companies. The positioning of Fastow and his raptors in the basement works as a visual metaphor to remind us that it was these fake structures which would sustain the company. As the executives start to infiltrate Fastow's "*shady world*" (55) beneath, a boundary is being crossed literally and ethically. Another split scene "Texas vs. California" (Act 2, scene 6) dramatizes the impact of the deregulation of the electricity industry. To shocking effect, Prebble juxtaposes the euphoric hysteria of the traders who treat the rise in share prices as a game with news reports on the consequences of deregulation on everyday life. If Enron was making money, California's energy market was in chaos, leading to a state of emergency. Skilling's deluded belief in his absolute invincibility is illustrated by his comment "We are the *good* guys in California. We are on the side of angels" (78). Finally, in the 2012 version of the script, by enabling Fastow to reply to the lawyer's cross-examination of Skilling in the trial scene in Act 3, Prebble creates another multi-layered dialogue which sheds light on their different presentation of the past:

LAWYER. So you knew and understood what Mr Fastow was doing at your company?

FASTOW. We knew and understood that it was wrong.

SKILLING. I knew and understood that it was legal.

LAWYER. Did you steal?

FASTOW. We stole. We all benefitted financially.

SKILLING. I would never steal from Enron.

LAWYER. Did you profit personally, illegally from LJM?

FASTOW. Yes, I did.

SKILLING. I did not know that. (145, 2012 version)

The technique of split scenes reflects the fast pace of the corporate world but is also characteristic of contemporary society which enables one to receive information from different sources at the same time and to switch rapidly from one event to another.

The use of direct address, a recurrent technique in *Enron*, is another non-naturalistic device which draws attention to the artifice of theatre. The play opens with the lawyer's prologue and closes with an epilogue in which Jeffrey Skilling addresses the audience. Other direct addresses convey information about the history of US corporate culture or are used to underline the role of perception and trust which are central to the play. In Act 1, Sloman, the analyst, explains that the investors trust the analysts who advise them where to put their money (32) and in Act 3 compares this with our trust in flying to argue that the success of Enron was based purely on belief in its profitability (98). Claudia Roe's monologue highlights the role of the public's perception in the value of a company and the increasingly immaterial nature of the 21st-century market economy: "Something is happening to business. At the beginning of this century. Things have started to get divorced from the underlying realities" (64). The fact that she is chased off the stage by the raptors is a physical manifestation of her position and her values within the company which have been replaced by a new vision, embodied by Skilling and Fastow.

One of the strengths of Prebble's play is its ability to offer a powerful visual embodiment of complex ideas. A network of fantastical imagery provides a visual means to dramatize the absurd, but intoxicating aspect of neoliberal enterprise. Prebble explained her creative approach by underlining the suspension of disbelief that is required of us when we are presented with a complex financial concept or a theatrical spectacle:

Whether you're talking about hedging or derivatives, [...] they tend to be based on some sort of metaphor or illusion [...]. And in a way, that's what we do in theater. When you write and you put on a show, essentially you're asking people to come into a room and believe that something that is not real is real. And that's sort of how financial instruments operate in a way. (Prebble interviewed by Ryssdal 2010)

Several striking satirical and expressionistic images emphasize the theatricality of the Enron story and explain its complexities to the audience. Fastow designed financial instruments which he named raptors, after the velociraptors in the film *Jurassic Park*, and Prebble makes them into half-reptile, half-human, dinosaur-like puppets. Starting as scraps of paper they come to life during the millennium party scene and come to symbolize the "shadow companies" conceived by Fastow. In the play, they quite literally eat the debt. In Act 2, scene 8 ("*Andy's Lair*" 86), when the debt crisis is getting worse, the behaviour of the raptors reveals much about the state of the company and the level of risk-taking. Two raptors are described as having "*grown very bold now – fast and aggressive*" (86). Another has become "*weak and sickly*" (86) – a foreboding sign of what is to come. The fake entities cannot support Enron's debt any longer and the edifice which has

been propping up Enron is about to crumble. By this time Fastow has become synonymous with the raptors (*"there is something eerie about Fastow"* 87) and Skilling's attitude (*"deeply unnerved"* 87) towards them reveals his paranoia. When the media becomes increasingly suspicious, he orders Fastow to destroy the raptors, and with them all trace of the fraudulent accounting system. The fake entities take on the role of Fastow's metaphorical mistress and Skilling tells him to choose between the shadow companies and Enron.

The opening image of three figures, dressed in business suits with mouse heads and white canes stumbling across the stage, is another example of Prebble's playful use of puppetry in her theatrical representation of the fall of American capitalism. This sequence, a reference to the Enron television commercial which aired in the late 1990s, is accompanied by the sound of the jingle (*"Why"*), followed by the voice-over by Jeffrey Skilling whose words are taken directly from the same commercial: "Enron Online will change the market. It is creating an open, transparent market place that replaces the dark, blind system that existed" (Prologue). In the original advertisement, the three mouse men (an allusion to the nursery rhyme *Three Blind Mice*) guided by dogs are a metaphor for the old system in which, according to Skilling, "blind" traders had to grope around in the dark to find the true market price. Prebble employs the same striking image but seizes on the irony of the metaphor. Far from announcing a new period of transparency and easy access to information, Enron under Skilling engaged in fraudulent cover-ups to conceal its debt. The *Three Blind Mice* reappear in Act 1, Scene 8 as Enron's board members. Like other stakeholders, they are called by Skilling to approve Fastow's accounting strategy based on fake companies. Their shadowy presence and tacit approval (they do not speak but merely consult amongst themselves) suggests their willingness to turn a blind eye to the unethical practices. Prebble thus creates a metaphor for the self-deception and corporate recklessness that characterized Enron.

There are many instances throughout the play of non-naturalistic techniques and visual metaphors used to depict other minor characters. The analysts form a barbershop quartet and sing a song celebrating Skilling's role in the company. As part of this emphasis on visibility, firms are personified. Accountancy firm Arthur Andersen appears as a ventriloquist with a dummy who represents the voice of moral conscience. In a throwback to slapstick comedy, the Lehman Brothers are presented as Siamese twins dressed in one suit. When they do not rate Enron's stock as highly as Fastow and Skilling would like, Fastow bullies them into rating it at *"Strong Buy"* (62) underlining the Lehman Brothers' complicit role in Enron's morally corrupt practices.

Lighting effects also contribute to the play's visual imagery. Prebble creates a contrast between the surface appearances (light, order, emptiness) of the corpo-

rate environment and the sinister depths (dark, chaos, clutter) of Fastow's basement lair – an underworld of illicit business practices. Commodities are projected like “*stars in the sky*” (20), producing a vision of a universe governed by the global marketplace. In Act 1, scene 4, “An Orgy of Speculation,” commodity prices light up the faces of the traders (27). If many of the lighting effects contribute to the dynamic atmosphere, the red light which glows from Fastow's boxes (he uses Russian doll boxes to explain his system of shadow companies to hide Enron's debt) is the most symbolic. Visible throughout, it is a reminder of the fraudulent system underpinning the company and serves as a warning sign. The relationship between the world's perception of Skilling and the value of Enron's stocks is also demonstrated before our eyes. When the crisis has begun and Skilling pleads imploringly with the stock prices, they plunge further (depicted in light projections on stage), announcing his demise and reminding us that he is only worth the market value of the company.

This analysis of the non-realistic aspects of the play reveals that Prebble uses theatrical and meta-theatrical devices to create a spectacle which draws attention to the facade of corporate success that Enron presented to the world. Just like the theatre, Enron's business empire was built upon artifice: a virtual economy trading in energy, morally dubious mark-to-market accounting and fake companies to conceal the debt.

It could be argued however that the aesthetics of the play do more than mirror the illusion of Enron's success and the gap between perception and reality. My contention is that Prebble's dramaturgical devices and structures are suggestive of the concept of “liquid modernity,” as defined by Zygmunt Bauman, to convey the global shifts in social, economic and political structures brought about by financial capitalism. Bauman's metaphor of liquidity, used to describe the modern human condition, is exemplified by Prebble's dramatization of the rise and fall of Enron. Whilst Bauman describes the phase of industrial capitalism as “solid modernity,” characterized by the belief in “a predictable (and so controllable) sequence of events,” he defines “liquid modernity” as the “growing conviction that change is the *only* permanence and uncertainty the *only* certainty” (Bauman 2012, *Foreword* 2–3). Chaos, disorder and a lack of collective purpose towards a common goal are all symptomatic of the late 20th-early 21st century, where power lies in the global flow of capital. Bauman claims that, in an increasingly globalized and interdependent world which goes beyond the nation-state, global responses are necessary. As this model has not yet been found, Bauman argues, we are still “groping in the dark” and instead “power [...] has been separated from politics [...] and so in addition to our confusion about ‘what to do’ we are now in the dark about ‘who is going to do it’” (Bauman 2012, *Foreword* 1–2).

The play adheres to realistic devices in terms of certain characters and the linear plot but, as shown previously, these exist alongside a number of dramatic strategies which disrupt realistic convention. The mixture of loud music, songs, lighting effects, video, multi-media projections and the highly energetic sequences of movement, suggested in Prebble's stage directions, all have a strong visual and auditory impact on the spectator. According to artistic director Rupert Goold, the aim was to make "high-tech rough theatre," using the "language of physical theatre" but at the same time the "production values of wealth" ("Enron: how we made a drama out of the financial crisis 1.00–1.10"). The constant movement and the fluidity of the dance sequences embody the high-octane atmosphere of the financial world, the flow of money and rapid exchange of commodities but also the chaos of the trading floor.⁶ By shifting away from the 'solid' structures of serious, political drama, Prebble's fast-paced theatrical extravaganza captures the reality of deregulated capitalism, as well as the unstable, unstoppable, 'liquid' nature of contemporary society. In Act 1, scene 4, the first long physical sequence ("An Orgy of Speculation") represents neoliberalism as spectacle. The rapid transformation of Enron under Skilling's presidency from an oil and gas company to a company trading in energy takes place before our eyes:

SKILLING. Let's trade.

Magical music.

[...] *The sound of singing, each their own different song. It builds to an atonal babble of commodity prices and bids. It's a musical cacophony of the trading floor. Over time, the voices all conjoin to meet in a pure, single note. It is beautiful.*

[...]

The traders flood the stage. The stock price rises.

The chaos, the physicality, the aggression and shouting of a trading floor. This simmers to doing deals, buzzing on phones and computers making money. Overlap is fine. (20–21)

The stage directions describe the dream-like fantasy of an ideal marketplace as "*This beautiful purity in Skilling's head*" (21). The value of commodities is expressed in song and the act of trading represented by a choreographed scene of rapid, stylized dance movements accompanied by a gesticulation – the technique of "arbing" used on the stock exchange. The act of trading is symptomatic

⁶ In her article on the representation of capitalism in the contemporary novel, Catherine Bernard finds parallels between the use of movement in the novel and in Prebble's play: "Movement is a key paradigm in the representation of late capitalism in many texts turning to the credit crunch crisis. In Lucy Prebble's morality play-cum-musical *Enron*, movement is of the essence to visualize the endless dance of the indexes and the entropic movement of capital" (149–150).

of the way time has become compressed in contemporary society. Technology means that information, communication, commodities, people and capital can circulate more rapidly. The overlapping of visual and auditory effects in the scene is a dramatic representation of the liquid and ethereal nature of contemporary society which enables one to live experiences simultaneously but momentarily. The speed and fluidity of the liquid phase of modernity are also evidenced in the choreography in Act 1, scene 7, which frames the workplace in increasingly virtual terms and renders visible the unstoppable, seductive excesses of the marketplace: “*The traders dance. As they do they create a round table. Skilling holds meetings round it. People come and go. Meetings end and begin. The table is removed. Fast, ordered fluidity. Numbers fly through the air*” (36).

The recurrent sequences of stylized movement and gestures depict the self-contained world of the financial bubble with its own rules and codes. The dance sequences materialize the intangibility of 21st century speculation and the frenzied, physical theatre is metonymic of the pace of financial capitalism and of life in a society driven by corporate greed. The circular dance patterns seem to capture the endless cycle that the traders are caught in, the treadmill they cannot get off. When in Act 2, scene 6 the traders perform robotic-like movements with light sabers to accompany the deregulation of the Californian electricity industry, they are reified through their automated gestures. Represented as depersonalized puppets, they become disposable in the financial economy. Thus, the fluidity of the choreographed scenes reflects what Bauman describes as the fluid state of modernity.

Bauman argues that this speeding up of the pace of life results in post-industrial societies living in the “instantaneous time of the software world” (Bauman 2012, 118). In other words, we increasingly exist in the here and now, in a society in which human experiences are transitory. This transient aspect of liquid modernity is illustrated in the portrayal of human relationships in *Enron*. In the play, human interaction is fragile and relationships short-lived. We learn that Skilling and his wife are separating and that he is in a sexual relationship with Claudia Roe. In the clinical sex scene, devoid of emotion, it is revealed that their affair is irrevocably connected to the workplace (fleeting moments in the boardroom, at a conference, on the Enron jet) and Roe admits to having been thinking about Skilling’s mark-to-market accounting strategy during sex. Within the neoliberal culture depicted in Prebble’s play, intimate human relationships are reframed in the language of business and money and the act of trading is articulated in the language of eroticism and sexual domination. This is a fast-moving world in which profit can be made quickly and where intimacy is reduced to brief, perfunctory moments of sexual gratification. However, the instability of their relationship soon becomes apparent: certain that she will be Enron’s next president, Roe,

the embodiment of the 1990s post-feminist, is furious when Lay chooses Skilling over her. After Skilling takes over, she is sacked after she questions the true state of the company's finances. At the end of the play, although Roe appears briefly sympathetic to Skilling's situation, she leaves him isolated at Lay's funeral, clearly stating her priority: "I got to take care of myself" (112). Similarly, after having been loyal to Skilling, Fastow ultimately puts himself first at the trial. As a result, the play represents human bonds as easily broken. Neoliberal economics have altered social relations with individual self-interest replacing compassion and solidarity.

According to Bauman, whereas in the solid phase of modernity the citizen was a "person inclined to seek her or his own welfare through the well-being of the city" (Bauman 2006, 36), guided by "patterns, codes and rules to which one could conform" (Bauman 2006, *Foreword* 7), the liquid phase of modernity is characterized by insecurity, uncertainty and the absence of moral purpose towards a common goal. As he notes: "[...] we don't have a clear image of a 'destination' towards which we seem to be moving" (Bauman 2012, *Foreword* 1). This lack of moral purpose is articulated in Prebble's play. Most of the characters have no notion of responsibility towards others and their overriding collective aim is towards making more money. It is the female characters who either question why things are as they are (Skilling's daughter) or who represent a more "solid" form of modernity (Roe). However, when Roe expresses ethical concerns about Enron's business strategy she is ejected from the company.

Roe and Skilling embody two contrasting visions of business which symbolize what Grochala terms "a shift from an industrial to a financial model of capitalism" (79). Whilst Roe seeks to set up power plants in India and expand the company's energy production overseas, Skilling envisions a company as a "powerhouse for ideas" (33), based on the trading of virtual products. These contrasting visions are laid bare in the following dialogue in which Roe and Skilling are competing for the presidency:

LAY. What do you see us trading, Jeff?

SKILLING. Energy. [...] Sure, we make it. We transport it. We sell it. Why don't we *trade* it? [...] Why do we even have to deliver the gas at all?

ROE. Well, we're a gas company, Jeff. [...] We should be focusing on building more plants. [...] India, Africa – huge power requirements in the future – [...] I can push through natural gas deals we already have experience of. You want power? Enron. India? Enron. South America? Enron.

SKILLING. Countries are meaningless. It's all going to be virtual. Oil and land run out. (16–18)

If Roe's vision for the company clearly transcends national boundaries, it still connects with the period of industrial capitalism, whereas Skilling's resolutely embraces a future based on a virtual economy.

Skilling's vision for a radical corporate make-over, driven by profit and ideas rather than by production, is expressed in both intellectual and physical terms and is consistent with Bauman's concept of liquid modernity. When defining the term, Bauman underlines the aim of "clearing the site," the tendency towards "'dismantling,' 'cutting out,' 'phasing out,' 'merging' or downsizing," all for the sake of [...] enhancing productivity and competitiveness" (Bauman 2012, 28). Similarly, Skilling wants to break down barriers, literally and figuratively, and his presidency represents a moment of rupture with past ways of doing business:

SKILLING. I've got in mind a different sort of company. I want to knock all these walls down, build a huge trading floor. [...] Flatten out the hierarchy. Make this a place of ideas. (15)

SKILLING. We should be coming up with new ideas. About everything. Employ the smartest people we can find. And have 'em free to look at whatever they want, free from old assumptions about what this company is. (18)

Bauman's concept of "clearing the site" is made tangible by the physical transformation of the company under Skilling's presidency:

The transformation of Enron. From discreet, regular offices, Skilling and Lay oversee it becoming an open-plan, free, shiny expanse.

It should feel like a physical liberation; a clearing of clutter. (19)

Of course, it is highly ironic that Skilling's Enron is full of glass (*Skilling looks down at the Enron he envisioned beneath him; glass, reflective surfaces, futuristic design* 20). In the words of Chris Megson, its "emptiness" is a symbol of Enron's debt and of the "ethical vacuum" within the company. As Megson has observed, we are reminded several times that Enron's business strategy was based on profit that does not actually exist. Mark-to-market is based on declaring profits that are merely forecast, the company starts trading energy when it has neither energy to sell nor pipelines, and Fastow's shadow companies are purely virtual (Megson 48). But Skilling presents the virtual aspects of Enron as something to admire: "There's a dignity to giving people something they *can't* touch" (19).

The crisis of agency and responsibility is the final aspect of Bauman's metaphor that is exemplified in Prebble's play. Bauman claims that in the liquid phase of modernity and in an increasingly globalized, interconnected world:

The 'liquidity' of our plight is caused primarily by what is summarily dubbed 'deregulation:' the separation of power [...] from politics [...] and the resulting absence or weakness of agency [...] and also caused by the 'polycentrism' of action on a planet integrated by a dense web of interdependencies. (Bauman 2012, *Foreword* 9)

Through the character of Skilling, but also through the corporation as a whole, the play raises crucial questions about the responsibility for the scandal at the heart of Enron. The different stakeholders all refuse to acknowledge their role in the fraudulent accounting system. When Arthur Anderson's dummy suggests there may be a conflict of interest, Skilling threatens to find another accountant. Arthur Anderson relents, agreeing to approve the strategy on the condition that the lawyers support it, thus shifting the responsibility. Ramsay and Hewlett, the legal firm, also attempt to pass the buck claiming that it is an issue for the accountants and the board. Skilling ultimately puts the responsibility of authorizing mark-to-market in the hands of the board of Enron, stretching the truth when he says: "The accountants and the lawyers are OK with it if you're OK with it, Ken" (53). In her direct address to the audience, Sloman, the analyst, tries to exonerate her role by framing the corporation as a bubble: "There's a strange thing goes on inside a bubble. It's hard to describe. People who are in it can't see outside of it [...]. You get glazed over. I believed in Enron. Everybody did" (98). Ken Lay is also shown turning a blind eye to the fraud when he is described as "*deliberately oblivious to the strange, exaggerated world of LJM*" (75). When California is plunged into darkness following the deregulation of the electricity industry, Lay blames the Governor of California. But most importantly agency, in the world of Enron, has shifted from individuals to the market. Refusing to show any sympathy or responsibility for the sky-rocketing energy bills, Skilling and the traders celebrate deregulation and the victory of the free market.

In the hearing, staged in Act 3, scene 2 and aptly entitled "The Circle of Blame," the stakeholders continue to refuse to recognise their role. The board emphasizes they are not lawyers, the lawyers protest that they are not accountants and the accountants admit that the practices were unusual but not illegal. Until the end, Skilling claims his innocence and rejects all allegations of wrongdoing: "We didn't do anything that every other fucking company doesn't do" (102) even boasting of his ability to tear up the moral rule of conduct: "The only difference between me and the people judging me is they weren't smart enough to do what we did" (108). His declaration "I resigned because the market demanded it" (102) perfectly illustrates the shift of ultimate responsibility away from individuals to the invisible hand of the market.

In the final moments of the play, Skilling addresses the audience directly, depicting himself as an ordinary man who "just wanted to change the world" (113).

In an attempt to exonerate himself, he asks us to consider that we are all responsible for supporting the neoliberal system. By comparing humanity to a graph of stocks and shares he implies that money rules us all. The dénouement thus challenges conventional dramaturgy but also binary morality. Although the ending reveals the impact of Enron's collapse on employees' lives and condemns those responsible, it eschews complete closure. Skilling's total lack of remorse compromises the process of catharsis and his suggestion that we are all complicit in supporting the virtual economy leaves the audience facing an uncomfortably ambiguous ending, both on an aesthetic and ethical level.

Enron is an example of highly-stylized physical theatre and its ensemble scenes succeed in evoking the intoxicating atmosphere of the trading floor. The accumulation of the fantastical effects illustrates the illusory workings of the neoliberal system and its inherent theatricality. By mixing naturalistic drama, musical, comedy, tragedy and morality fable, Prebble has authored an exhilarating spectacle which highlights what Dan Rebellato has described as her ability to "see the theatrical in our contemporary moment" (3:52). The chaotic and unruly nature of contemporary capitalist society depicted in *Enron* are a physical embodiment of the fluid, ephemeral aspect of modernity, as defined by Bauman. The minimalist and ethereal staging of the late 20th century workplace, in which numbers conjure up a cosmic universe, calls to mind the increasingly virtual character of business, whilst Skilling's ultimate refusal to take responsibility points to a crisis of agency.

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How To Survive a Crisis: Forming a New Self in Zinnie Harris's *How to Hold Your Breath* (2015)

Abstract: The economic crisis of 2007–2009, a financially devastating event that encircled the globe, prompted British playwrights to turn their theatrical gaze toward the world of finance, a topic not usually at the forefront of theatrical productions. Within a five-year span, a myriad of plays inspired by the Great Recession premiered, including David Hare's *The Power of Yes* (2009), Lucy Prebble's *Enron* (2009), Laura Wade's *Posh* (2010), Clare Duffy's *Money: The Game Show* (2013), and Tim Price's *Protest Song* (2014).

Hovering just outside this group of plays is Zinnie Harris's *How to Hold Your Breath* (2015), but unlike the plays of her peers which are invested in the contemporary crisis of the day, or in the case of *Enron*, recent history, her play explores a not far away future, where an immediate, cataclysmic crisis ravages Europe over the space of a weekend. *How to Hold Your Breath* impresses the audience by its extreme, experimental, personal, and devastating aesthetics. Zinnie Harris's dramatic peers' plays are distanced from those sheer moments of financial terror and uncertainty in the spring, summer and fall of 2008 where everything seemed to be tottering on the brink of an economic cataclysm. They examine the moments before, trying to explain how it all happened, like Hare and Duffy's work, or examine the moments after, looking at the debilitating impacts of policies put in place to emerge from the crisis, like Price's take on the Occupy movement. Others ensconce themselves in the world of those completely unaffected by the crisis, like the spoiled young men protected in the comfortable web of being a 1%er as in Laura Wade's *Posh*. On the contrary, faced with an almost instantaneous collapse of the financial systems in Europe, Harris's main character Dana, who is her response to the canonical Everyman character, has to make a choice because her self-interested value system no longer is a viable option in this new world. A change must be made. In doing so, she has to decide who she will become in the face of this crisis. How will she now act? What choices will she make in the face of such an overwhelming situation? In essence, the question of "Who do you become?" is an essential and oft returned to question for Harris, as she challenges her audiences to consider the ramifications of an immediate disruption to one's life and the lasting effect it will have on one's identity. Considering the globe is concurrently struggling to deal with a cataclysmic

mic economic collapse and a medical pandemic, Harris's question is, unfortunately, presciently apt.

Introduction

The Great Recession had a devastating effect on world economies (all three of Iceland's banks defaulted and Greece had to be bailed out by a group of international entities, including the International Monetary Fund). Individual retirement accounts of millions of workers were decimated with some unfortunate investors taking on catastrophic losses. In the United States, millions of homes faced foreclosure, due to the overextension of homeowners borrowing against their mortgages in the belief that the value of their property would continue their exponential rise. While not as drastic as in the U.S., the United Kingdom faced startling high repossession numbers in 2008 with 40,000 mortgages being repossessed, a number not seen since the mid-1990s (Falloon and Milliken). The ripples of the economic crisis dramatically impeded the financial actions of some members of the Millennial generation, who grew skeptical of home ownership and investing in the stock market (until the rise of COVID, which abruptly shifted the focus to the game-like activity of trading and comforting safety of owning one's own home). The vastness of the recession's seismic effect immediately became a focal point of the British theatre in the ensuing years of the recovery, as a bounty of plays were produced from 2009 through 2015, addressing the crisis with a theatrical spin. Some of the more representative titles that appeared on British stages during this time period include David Hare's *The Power of Yes* (2009), Dennis Kelly's *The Gods Weep* (2010), Laura Wade's *Posh* (2010), Theatre Uncut's curated collection of short plays by various playwrights in response to austerity cuts (2011), Clare Duffy's *Money: The Game Show* (2013), Anders Lustgarten's *If You Don't Let Us Dream, We Won't Let You Sleep* (2013), Brad Birch's *Even Stillness Breathes Softly Against a Brick Wall* (2013), Jack Thorne's *Hope* (2014), Tim Price's *Protest Song* (2014), and, what will be the main subject of this chapter, Zinnie Harris's *How to Hold Your Breath* (2015), which provides a contrast from the others. Rather than looking back at the cause of the Great Recession or the immediate aftereffects, especially in regard to austerity measures, she pivots forward, positing a dystopian near future where a tsunami like, cataclysmic crisis ravages Europe over the space of a weekend, far surpassing the economic earthquake of 2007–9. As one might expect, overlapping with these Great Recession inspired plays were a number of dystopic plays including, not only Harris's play, but also Mike Bartlett's *13* (2011), Philip Ridley's *Radiant Vermin* (2015), and debbie tucker green's *hang* (2015). According to Trish Reid, these works were

“peopled with characters disabled by the terrors of precarious living, neoliberal (in)versions of personal freedom, environmental disaster, and the demeaning effects of corporate capitalism” (73). Interestingly, Harris is the only playwright to combine these two terrors into one narrative, providing a link between economic Armageddon and a “dystopian hell” (Reid 79). As a result, Harris’s play posits that the usual migration path north across the Mediterranean Sea reverses itself, as European citizens flee the wide-ranging economic catastrophe, and now, ironically, seek stability on the southern shores of the Mediterranean. Her play documents the travails of main character Dana and her sister Jasmine, as they struggle in their journey to Egypt in the midst of the meltdown. Finally reaching the sea, they both succumb to the dangerous waves of the Mediterranean during a harrowing, night-time crossing with other migrant refugees. Much like the focus of Vicky Angelaki’s *Social and Political Theatre in 21st Century Britain*, Harris is “concerned with the individuals inhabiting the space of crisis, attempting, awkwardly, to rediscover a sense of belonging” (16). Through the tale of these two sisters, Harris challenges Dana and the audience to consider the individual struggles and efforts it takes to survive, when all around turns to chaos, and poses the question of “Who do we become?” in the midst of such skirmishes. Moments, like the Great Recession and Dana’s journey, challenge our values and force a reckoning into confronting who we truly are and what we believe.

Explaining the Economic Crisis

Before discussing Harris and her play, which premiered at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs in February of 2015, it will be beneficial to take a quick look at two of the plays inspired by the Great Recession to appreciate how dramatic a departure Harris’s play is from her peers. David Hare and Clare Duffy both created works that delve into the mechanics of the Great Recession by trying to explain how and why it happened.¹ Hare, through the use of a documentary drama framework, places himself at the center of *The Power of Yes*, which was produced at the National Theatre, as he travels in the U.S. and U.K. seeking an explanation from experts. With his guide Masa Serdarevic, a soon to be *Financial Times* reporter, Hare makes connections with various economic authorities and is taught the meaning of various economic terms. The character Hare becomes the voice of

¹ Similar arguments can be made about the other plays listed, but as space limits the discussion of these other plays, I have selected Hare and Duffy as being representative, since they address the crisis directly.

the average citizen who is flummoxed by all the terms and governmental policies, seeking to discover how such a cataclysm came about. He tells us: “Where were you on September 15th 2008? Do you remember? Did you even notice? Capitalism ceased to function for about four days. This summer I set out to find out what happened” (Hare 3). While providing detailed information about the nature of the collapse by sharing observations and lectures from numerous major governmental and financial players in the U.K. and U.S., the play itself received mixed reviews from critics, some praising the journalistic fervor of Hare’s research and theatricalization of his uncertainties about the nature of the crisis. And yet, the piece was mostly challenged about its inherent theatricality, with some even questioning if it was a play at all. *The Wall Street Journal* provided a summation of the work, echoed by other critics that “The play doesn’t work as drama. It’s more like a lecture given by two dozen speakers” (Levy). Undoubtedly, one could argue that the dry recitations about policy and governmental decisions led to some of the critical distaste, and a few critics noted that Lucy Prebble with her play *Enron* (2009) had offered a far more rousing, enlightening, and theatrical examination of the economic crisis, even though she started her play before the Great Recession hit and addressed the bankruptcy of the Texas based energy company Enron, which had happened earlier in the decade.

Clare Duffy’s play, *Money: The Game Show*, works in a similar manner as Hare’s docudrama, as she too aims to document how the crisis came about, noting that “theatre is a particularly good place to think about money because we find it so hard to see how performative it is in everyday life and of course what kinds of performances it demands of us” (Duffy 13). However, rather than the overt didactic method of Hare’s verbatim drama, she designed an energetic, crowd participatory game show where audience members were divided into two groups, whereby they competed with one another over the 10,000 pounds present on the stage. Led by former hedge fund managers, Queenie and Casino, who lost their jobs in the Great Recession, the audience is taken through monetary competitions to grow their individual funds through questionable bets, much like the financial titans did with the housing market. Like Hare, Duffy’s aim is to educate the audience about various decisions that led to the crisis but using a more engaging and hands-on method of instruction. The critics had mixed feelings about Duffy’s work. *The Daily Telegraph* described *Money* as “a work in progress,” where “it feels that a gap has opened between Duffy’s ideas about her subject, and her ability to translate them into drama” (Shilling). While *The Times* found her ending “particularly intriguing,” they echoed the reviewer from *The Daily Telegraph* that the play still needed tweaking, suggesting it “needs more light bulb moments when foggy notions are suddenly made clear. And 100 minutes, no interval, is too long to spend on any gameshow” (Maxwell).

The intention of both plays, then, was to help the audience members come to an understanding of the complex configurations underpinning the housing crisis, collapsing banks, and international bankruptcies. However, at the same time their plays avoid considering the ramifications of the collapse on the economic victims. They distanced themselves through lecture and games from those sheer moments of financial terror and uncertainty that swept the globe in the spring, summer, and fall of 2008, where everything seemed to be tottering on the brink of an economic cataclysm. They are, in a sense, academic considerations. As we will see, what separated Harris from her peers was her intentional dive into the personal loss, painful experience, and emotional devastation of economic victims, as represented through her characters Dana and Jasmine.

The Fragile Civilizations of Zinnie Harris's Theatre

Harris remarked in an interview with *The Scotsman* that the theatre is where “thought experiments” can take place for the writer as well as for the audience (Mansfield). In the same interview, Harris noted that theatre “should be the place where we are thinking about what is the right response; what is the instinctive response, and can we be slightly better?” (Mansfield). Nothing better exhibits this philosophy than her play *Fall* (2008), where the main question of the play is how to judge war criminals who have committed atrocities. Their being executed for their actions merely perpetuates the violence leading to a possible recognition that the barbarity has to stop. Even more importantly she asks what happens to the person who has to make the decision? What are the lasting repercussions on the individual psyche? In essence, when faced with a difficult decision or situation, can we possibly become slightly better than we used to be? Can we rise above our anger, pain, and suffering? Similarly, *How to Hold Your Breath* posits the same query. When faced with a dire, economic crisis, what is the right response? As Maxine Peake, who played Dana, told *The Evening Standard*, “Until people put themselves in that position I don’t think they really understand” (Jury).

Fergus Linehan, the director of the Edinburgh International Festival, described Harris to *The Scotsman* as a writer who deals with “the fragility of civilizations” (Mansfield), and a cursory glance at her collection of work testifies to that description. Her first play *By Many Wounds* (1999) details the delicate composition of a family struggling to confront a loss. The award winning *Further than the Furthest Thing* (2000) tells the story of long time, rural inhabitants of an

island forced to evacuate to urban Manchester due to a volcanic eruption. (Harris based the play on the real inhabitants of Tristan da Cunha, who were evacuated to Southampton.) While relocated to this foreign environment, the islanders face the shock of industrialized labor and question their economic and personal values and choices. *The Wheel* (2011) becomes a parable about the horrors of war, as Beatriz travels through multiple battle fields over a century of wars (World War I, World War II, Vietnam, the Gulf War) in an effort to return a little boy to his father. Throughout the journey, she confronts atrocities and must make ethical decisions about her values, only to discover that she is trapped in a cycle that she is condemned to repeat. The conundrum of *Fall* is echoed in Harris's rewriting of *The Oresteia*, called *This Restless House* (2016). Both Clytemnestra and Electra have to make a choice about whether to avenge those wrongly murdered and in having to make such a decision, each is confronted with the question of who they have become in making their choice. *How to Hold Your Breath* is no different from these works. Similar to Mike Bartlett's *Earthquakes in London* (2010), Harris's play explores the possibility of an impending, disastrous future—but whereas Bartlett was interested in an environment collapse that has lasting repercussions 500 years into the future, Harris turns her eyes toward a near future, only a few years on from the Great Recession, which, when she wrote her play, was still a nagging, staggering weight on the global economy, especially in Europe, where countries like Greece and Iceland were still stymied by economic struggles as they continued to regain their financial footing. Harris, writing in the midst of a sluggish recovery, offers a play that portends that the next financial collapse will be much worse. First world citizens will suddenly find themselves reversing the usual migration route by now seeking aid and assistance in third world countries, which now offer bastions of escape and hope. In an interview with *Time Out*, Maxine Peake noted the predictive nature of Harris's play when it came to the socio-economic situation in Europe: "We are not a million miles from disaster.... This big dinosaur of capitalism is crawling on its last legs, though we keep pumping it up" (Lukowski), and this idea is echoed by the character of the Librarian, who appears sporadically throughout the play to provide Dana with self-help books. When challenged by Dana about how the entire state of affairs could have deteriorated so quickly, since she thought that the banks "were fine yesterday." The Librarian responds, "They were teetering yesterday. They weren't fine yesterday" (83). Harris's play posits that the signs are currently there, but we avoid looking for them, content to look the other way, while the dangers grow, as evidenced by the number of cli-

mate change plays that appeared during the 2010s,² aiming to awaken the theater going public, and the previously mentioned dystopian plays, which served “as a revealing index to the anxieties of our time” (Reid 73).

An additional rationale for Harris in writing *How to Hold Your Breath* was in reaction to only male characters representing the “Everyman” figure. In an interview with *The Times* she explained that: “It’s curious to me that when we have a role like Willy Loman or King Lear, they’re emblematic of humankind, but when you have a woman at the centre of a play, they stand for women. I am trying to think about ways of putting women in a central role, to stand for us all” (Wade). The tepid response to the play and Dana’s travails by critics – “ragbag...clodhopping” (Clapp); “completely mystifying” (Dymoke); “overwrought symbolism” (Hitchings); “facile” (Taylor) and “quasi-symbolist extraterrestrial tragicomic chicklit road-movie spoof” (Evans) – drew the ire of the play’s director Vicky Featherstone, who argued that the critics response was driven precisely by their lack of appreciation for Harris’s decision to create a play centered on a female Everyman. Harris responded to the less than stellar reviews by telling *The Observer* that “isn’t that the point of art? That we are trying to do something? Of course you are entitled not to like it, but don’t condemn or destroy someone’s career because they have tried” (Crompton). Harris continued her castigation of the critics in the same interview:

there is something about a woman who raises her voice in public that is difficult for us as a society. The woman who takes herself seriously is quite a difficult proposition. It is all right if you write a farce about just how silly women are, but if you turn that into a play which has something serious to say, then you are trying to stand in a man’s shoes. There is nothing like filling an auditorium with a voice and I think, unconsciously, that is a difficult place, even for other women. (Crompton)

Harris’s comments echo what Sarah Ahmed posited in her article on killjoy feminism: “In speaking up or speaking out, you upset the situation. That you have described what was said by another as a problem means you have created a problem. You become the problem you create.” Dana’s unwillingness at the play’s beginning to concede to a patriarchal figure echoes the same issue Harris articulates above. Whereas Harris found herself and her play the recipient of con-

² See Boles, William C. “Post-Truth: A Brief Introduction.” *Theatre in a Post-Truth World: Text, Politics, and Performance*. Ed. William C. Boles. London: Bloomsbury, 2022. 20–8; Hudson, Julie. “‘If You Want to be Green Hold Your Breath’: Climate Change in British Theatre.” *New Theatre Quarterly* 28:3 (August 2012): 260–71; and Schaefer, Kerrie. “Performing environmental change: MED Theatre and the changing face of community-based performance research.” *RiDE: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 17.2 (May 2012): 247–63.

descending comments and reviews, Dana because of her audacity to challenge her one-night stand lover undergoes a tenuous and dangerous journey across Europe, much like a “contemporary Mother Courage” (Aston 305), and is tested. Like other Harris characters, that forces her to question her identity and whether she needs to change, becoming a better person.

Dana’s Journey to Selflessness

At the play’s opening Dana and Jarron are in bed, having met at a bar the previous evening, where she expected him to “buy [her] a drink, light [her] a cigarette” and in return she seduced him because she “liked the look of him” (18). Her sense of privilege and ease with a commodified life is highlighted during their post-coital, morning wake-up, when Dana announces she is hungry. Jarron asks: “what have you got” (15). Dana’s kitchen is bereft of food, but that is not a problem because “there’s a shop downstairs/ [with] anything you can imagine” (15). Stocking food is unnecessary because in a society predicated on a 24-hour availability of grab-and-go food fixtures (as well as other products), all she has to do is go downstairs and purchase what sates her need at the moment. There is no need for advanced planning or consideration of what may come in the future, as the capitalist system of immediate fulfillment will always be there to provide her with sustenance.

That ease of existence, where planning for the future is unnecessary, is echoed in the next scene with her pregnant sister Jasmine, where Dana realizes that she is late for a grant interview in the center of town and turns to her sister for help. Jasmine encapsulates the entitled life Dana has led: “I’m not going to bring you coffee. I am not a waitress, a hand-maiden, I am not the fucking mother, you forgot about it, OK. You can deal with it” (29–30). However, because she has focused exclusively on the “now” and the pleasure to be captured in the moment (her pick-up of Jarron in the bar), Dana has no clean clothes. Instead, she expects Jasmine to offer her the blouse and shoes she is currently wearing. Despite her earlier protestation, Jasmine ends up stripping herself bare to aid her thoughtless and ill-prepared sister.

Ironically, her treatment of her sister is, in part, modeled in the research project she presents before the board. Her research model “liken[s] the customer-business contact to other basic human interactions, such as... friendship” (36). Her theory equates emotions with commercial transactions, as

customer exchanges occur over a wide range of communication channels, and there is no distinction in these channels between other communications that the customer might re-

ceive. You might in the same second get a text from your partner, and then from your bank. To maximise the feeling of mutuality, should the text from your bank feel *more* on your team than from your partner? It is *your* bank, there to listen to you. (37–8)

Her redefinition of commercial transactions challenges the long-held positions associated with consumer and seller, where the seller pursues as much profit as possible, while the consumer competes to find the best deal available. Dana replaces this competitive exchange with a comfy, feel-good dynamic where the traditions of business are replaced instead with a philosophy based on an equal stance of friendship and support between consumer and company. As the play progresses, Dana's entitlement and her idealistic redefinition of the capitalist system will crash against the brutality of an economic collapse. In the midst of this breakdown of normal financial systems her values will be challenged and she will face those previously identified questions of what to do? What do you do when your philosophy no longer holds true? What choices do you make? Who do you become?

Interestingly, Harris posits that the alternative to Dana's positions can be found via Jarron, who claims to be a devil, a demon, "a really fucking powerful person" (23).³ Jarron offers a philosophy where relationships and daily actions are equated with a specific economical value and worth. As the Librarian later tells Dana about the nature of devils and demons, "they are the original transactional creature" (45). The morning after he has sex with Dana, he offers her money, having assumed by her dress and forwardness that she was a prostitute. Despite her protestations that "I have a fucking mind which I can make up" (19) when it comes to whom she brings home with her, Jarron counters with "I pay for sex, I thought everyone does" (19). Continuing to refuse his attempts to pay her, she professes "I'll make love to you because I want to" (21). He argues that Dana's response "is really fucked up" (23). For Jarron all parts of his life are assigned a value and "taking into account the distress you have caused me, the inconvenience of having to return. I have charted it all, put my petrol in, my time, the wear and tear on my car, and 45 euros left to you covers it I think" (48). After the economic collapse Dana's view of relationships and transactions fall asunder and the mindset of Jarron's becomes the more prevalent one.

Based on her presentation, Dana has been nominated for an international position and must travel to Alexandria, Egypt to meet with more potential collea-

³ As for introducing a character into the play who is a demon, Harris had this to say about her writing style, when interviewed by Mark Brown: "Somehow I can never stay in a naturalistic vein, I always want to lift it into magical realism, or something else goes on. I don't know that it's conscious at all" (191).

gues. Joining her on the journey is Jasmine, but shortly after they begin their trip, the European economy begins to collapse, stranding the two sisters in Hartenharten as they are unable to access their funds. At first, Dana's mindset of entitlement still remains intact. When they fail to find a bank open, she suggests to Jasmine that they will find another one tomorrow. Jasmine chastises her by saying "I live in the real world, Dana" (86), as she realizes the closing of the banks is a sign of an oncoming crisis. Referencing the banking chaos of the Great Recession, Jasmine says, "I thought it wasn't supposed to happen again" (86). Even though the sisters cannot pay for the hotel room in Hartenharten, Dana still books a room, believing that they can obtain money from the embassy in the morning. However, during her time in Hartenharten, her perspective begins to undergo a shift from a continual focus on self-interest and her own pleasures to a recognition of the importance of her sister in her life, as Jasmine has a miscarriage and desperately needs medical attention. The roles between the siblings have now switched as Dana becomes the caregiver for her sister. In seeking aid Dana discovers that Jarron's perspective now dominates as every action now has a transactional cost. As the dispatcher informs her, "the hospital now only takes cash" (114). Dana, who thoughtlessly took the shirt and shoes from her sister's body a few days earlier, now has to rely on herself for a solution. In order to see a doctor, she sells her phone, but her sister still has medical needs and the only item she has left with value is her body, which was the very act that she vociferously rejected when Jarron offered her money. The transactional nature of sex is now something she must accept, which runs counter to her redefining of capitalism as acts based on friendship. Her role in prostituting herself shatters her sense of entitlement when it comes to making her own choices as well as her philosophy of the emotional connections between seller and buyer. The scene between Dana and her John is horrifyingly brutal. She at first tries to extend control over the exchange by demanding 45 Euros, but quickly lowers the amount to a paltry ten Euros, when she realizes she has no position of power from which to negotiate. In this case the consumer controls the price of goods because of her desperate need to obtain any funds possible to help her sister. The punter abuses her, Harris describing the exchange as his "almost raping her," and after he is done Dana "is bruised and broken" (138). Her previously expressed philosophy to Jarron of sexual empowerment and entitlement of "I'll make love to you because I want to" has changed to a realistic understanding of her dire situation.

The journey Dana has undertaken parallels those taken by Willy Loman, King Lear, and other dramatic characters held up as examples of Everyman. The male figure falls and in so doing challenges the audience to see some semblance of themselves through his actions. Dana too falls, representing the strip-

ping away of the middle-class, entitled “Everyman,” who is a shell of the person she used to be. And like Loman and Lear, Dana too dies at the end, drowning while trying to make a nighttime crossing to Egypt to escape the chaos of Europe. While some commentators noted the similarity between Dana and Jasmine’s migratory plight from Europe to Africa as paralleling the headlines of Syrian refugees sailing across the Mediterranean to Italy and Greece,⁴ Tom Cornford offers a differing perspective, honing on the monetary focus of the play. He argues: “*How to Hold Your Breath* is a play that seeks not to expose the condition of migrancy so much as the structural violence of privilege. Its depiction of refugee status is always set against the wealth and safety to which Dana (and, by extension, its audience) expect to be entitled” (104). And that idea of entitled wealth is also how Elaine Aston read the play, suggesting that the tragic fate of Dana and her sister can be tied to our constant “[p]apering over the cracks of a hubristic capitalist order that constantly overreaches, repeatedly fails, and yet still does not fall” (305).

However, if we return to Harris’s conception of what theatre should be doing, we remember that she is asking us and her characters: “what is the right response; what is the instinctive response, and can we be slightly better?” Harris posits an ending that echoes William Shakespeare and Arthur Miller’s *Everyman*. Despite the hardship, brutality, and difficulties, like Lear and Loman, Dana has had an epiphany and become a better person. Her self-serving nature is extinguished, as her focus becomes intent on her sister and becoming her sister’s protector and caregiver. Where before Jasmine gave her shirt and shoes up, her time and effort to support her sister’s daily wants and needs, Dana sacrifices her dignity, philosophy, and body to aid Jasmine in her recovery from her miscarriage and the ensuing physical and psychological frailty that ensued. She was tested but found worthy of change in becoming a better person; she does not let the hardships worsen her. In the last scene of the play, after she and her sister have drowned trying to make the crossing to Egypt, her body is watched over by the Librarian and Jarron, who reveals that she rests in a liminal state between death and life, as there is still a faint heartbeat. The Librarian argues she should be allowed to die as she has lost her sister and has been through enough. However, Jarron offers a different perspective suggesting that what she experienced in

4 I did this myself in my review of the play for *Theatre Journal*, where I wrote:

While Harris’s bleak future view of Europe was encapsulated in that moment, it also captured the current political situation of Syrian refugees making a similar journey to Europe and meeting the same fate. Harris suggests (and as the Greek debacle and the European response to its immigrant problem during the summer of 2015 revealed) that the debilitating crisis that has always seemed to plague Third World nations is now a First World problem. (Boles 107)

her journey was necessary because “she was naïve. She had to see a thing or two” (155). Elaine Aston echoes Jarron’s comment in her argument that Harris’s vision of our current world makes us see “the urgent necessity of becoming other than who ‘we’ are” (307). In other words, Dana was made to face the way life truly is, which is transactional in all of its facets. While some might argue that Jarron will just continue the suffering of Dana by bringing her back to life, I suggest that Jarron has tested her throughout the journey, challenging the way she lived her life as an entitled, self-absorbed capitalist. The play though still offers unresolved questions at the end. Is Jarron done with her? After all, has his debt of 45 euros been repaid? Will Dana remain the more selfless self that developed over her journey? What will happen when she learns of her sister’s death? Harris ultimately leaves it to the audience to decide the fate of Dana and whether, ultimately, she has been saved and transformed or whether her journey forward, sans sister, will continue to be grim and demanding.

Conclusion

This path of uncertainty for Dana’s future at the end of the play perfectly encapsulates the tenor of British crisis plays of the 2010s. As Vicky Angelaki notes, there are two paths that are possible in those dramatic narratives embedded in crisis moments. The character “teeter[s] at the edge between improvement or decline, salvation or catastrophe” (Angelaki 2). The future is still unknown for Dana, and, subsequently, for us as well. For Harris *How to Hold Your Breath* documents the dangers of economic cataclysm and the damaging repercussions that come from a financial collapse more immediate and dramatic than the Great Recession, during which a sister comes to appreciate the care necessary to aid her struggling sister. Their journey ends, relying on Angelaki’s words, in decline and catastrophe. And yet, at the same time it must be noted Dana has matured through the hellacious travails of her journey, and if Dana is the representative of humanity in the new millennium, if she is the “Everyman” that we not only deserve, but also need, then we leave the theatre with the idea that the selfish, entitled behavior that, in part, led to the Great Recession must change. In its place is a greater recognition of what we owe to others in our everyday lives and a more invested awareness of not only the transactional nature of the ways of capitalism, but also in its precarious structure that could hold within its DNA the next economic collapse. Through Dana’s journey we are taught that we need to see the world for what it truly is and be prepared for what is to come, we have to seek out the path of salvation rather than catastrophe. And in the process, we may become a little bit better ourselves.

As a final coda, it is worth mentioning that in the summer of 2022, after a twice delayed opening due to Covid, a musical version of *101 Dalmatians* premiered at Regent's Park Open Air Theatre (the production is not associated with The Walt Disney Company). The musical featured songs, lyrics, and book that were all based on Zinnie Harris's stage adaptation of the Dodie Smith novel. At first glance such a project – a children's story about two dogs searching for their stolen puppies – would not seem to fit the darker nature of Harris's oeuvre. However, a closer look reveals a similar overlap with her other works and even the crisis-focused plays of the 2010s. Pongo and Perdita, the two dalmatian parents, find themselves faced with a calamity, a crashing down of their lives as they know it. In order to get their offspring back the two need to go on a journey (a device used in many of Harris's plays) and in the process discover the dark truth of world (embodied by Cruella de Vil) outside the safety of their owner's comfortable Regent's Park home. This struggle and subsequent journey rests at the heart of many plays by Harris, and more specifically to this chapter, *How To Hold Your Breath*. It might sound a bit facile, but an argument can be made that the journey of Dana and Jasmine and Pongo and Perdita are mirror images. The former ends with tragedy and catastrophe while the latter offers the possibility of another track, a track of salvation and success, partly borrowing Angelaki's terms above. Perhaps this most recent production by Harris indicates a change afoot and a brighter future from all those darker plays of the 2010s. After all, this is Harris's first production of the 2020s. Will this new decade of writing, as represented by this one sample, offer the possibility of salvation taking precedent over catastrophe, and good triumphing over evil? Or is this merely a blip, since the political, economic, social and environmental troubles of the 2010s have not seemed to dissipate in this new decade? No doubt, over the next few years it will become apparent the direction Harris and her peers see as the response to the continuing crises of the 2020s: the continuing view of dire cataclysm or a new vision offering a hopeful salvation.

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II The Politics of Intimacy

Vicky Angelaki

Ella Hickson's *ANNA* (2019) and Lucy Kirkwood's *Mosquitoes* (2017): Staging the Female Body Electric

Abstract: In the recent period, Ella Hickson and Lucy Kirkwood have emerged as two of the most original and impactful voices of contemporary British theatre. In this essay, I shall be discussing their two plays *ANNA* (2019, directed by Natalie Abrahami) and *Mosquitoes* (2017, directed by Rufus Norris) respectively, drawing on theoretical frameworks informed by Michel Foucault and Tracy C. Davis. These will allow me to trace the processes of contingency, experiment, rehearsal and execution that both utilize and shape the human body towards the completion of tasks that extend beyond private imperative, into public mission. Such enquiries will also allow me to probe how the body's own intricacies and errancies might interject different layers of agency in high-risk procedures. All the while, my emphasis will remain on the ways in which both Hickson and Kirkwood construct a profoundly gendered playscape, where networks between female-identifying actors are pivotal towards the conceptualization and execution of certain tasks. The electric body that the title of this piece refers to, then, is equally charged, as I go on to discuss, through a sense of duty; the feeling of being compelled to perform; and internal urges and priorities. Such factors, as will be shown, can both co-exist and antagonize one another.

Introduction

One of the distinguishing elements in Hickson and Kirkwood's respective work more broadly framed is prescience, here an active artistic engagement with the world at the same moment as it is about to shift and refold into its next iteration. As Hickson's *Oil* landed at the Almeida in the autumn of 2016, humanity's transgressions against the natural environment and the systematic abuse of resources exposed in plain view, our vocabulary began to shift resolutely from discussing climate change to climate *crisis* or *emergency*. As *The Writer* appeared in the same theatre in the spring of 2018, conversations around gender and toxic masculinities were becoming forever refocused under the sharp lens of #MeToo and #TimesUp (it is important to be reminded that Hickson's play, in terms of the creative process timeline, predates the cataclysmic revelations that informed these events). And then there is *ANNA*, whose main events are as follows: through the

course of a dinner party one February evening in 1968, where Anna and only one other character (Elena), are aware of the true staged context of the event, Anna will frame her husband's (Hans) new boss (Max Becker, who, however, now introduces himself as Christian Neumann), with whom she has a longer history than we initially understand, as a political traitor. By the end of the play, repercussions personal and political are severe.

Following, like Hickson, a path of gradual establishment as one of Britain's most compelling writers of what we might describe as the more recent generation of playwrights, Kirkwood did, however, have a considerable early hit through her play *Chimerica* (2013), which largely dominated discourse surrounding her name in the earlier years. In that sense, it was a similar context to Lucy Prebble's *ENRON* (2009) (Prebble's work is not explored in this text, but her importance as a female playwright of the same broader generation merits a reference): the sprawling political play that takes an unflinching look at history, human agency, complicity and trauma – as well as assumptions about democracy. As with *ENRON*, the success of *Chimerica* might well have driven the narrative of Kirkwood's career had there not been, from a certain point onwards, a sequence of plays that made considerable and emphatic additions to Kirkwood's body of work, bolstering her versatility as a playwright. These include *The Children* (2016); *Mosquitoes*, on which I focus here, and *The Welkin* (2020), all of which, in different ways, evidence a consistent curiosity and engagement with science as primary subject matter for the theatre. *Mosquitoes* is an expansive play that runs at almost three times the length of Hickson's *ANNA*, lasting approximately three hours, with one interval; *ANNA* has a duration of circa one hour, running uninterrupted. *Mosquitoes* focuses on two sisters, Alice and Jenny; it is a study on the genetic differentiation of close relatives; on love and loss; on desires and disappointments, as it follows the siblings, one of whom (Alice) is a scientist on the precipice of greatness, while the other (Jenny) is unhappily employed, with a compromised sense of direction. The women's mother, Karen, also features prominently, an eminent scientist in the twilight of her life, as does Luke, Alice's son, facing some considerable challenges of his own while navigating a heavily mediatized world as a young adult.

The plays that this essay focuses on, each in a distinctive way, and through different styles and approaches to playwriting, share an emphasis on the female body, its capabilities and controls, both internally and externally imposed. Both plays are also, significantly, National Theatre productions and, more specifically still, new commissions, staged within the span of two years for the considerable audience that the venue tends to attract. Both plays explore the body's interactions with technology, science, the state, and forms of intervention on the human that involve mediation. Mediation is a charged and intricate term: it implies, in

ANNA, political agency and, in *Mosquitoes*, scientific innovation. What the plays further have in common is their staging of the female body as the site and bearer of mediation, its proponent and executor, its instigator and its doubter.

The title of this essay is in dialogue with Walt Whitman's seminal text (1855), of which I quote, here, an indicative relevant excerpt:

I sing the body electric,
The armies of those I love engirth me and I engirth them,
They will not let me off till I go with them, respond to them,
And disconcert them, and charge them full with the charge of the soul.

The ways in which the scientific and the socio-political interblend make for a richer canvas for a contextualization of the above, and are an additional parameter that interconnects the plays. Women as essential workers in society, through their different roles, come to the foreground. These roles of care are as much domestic as they are public, and even though the plays often expose the challenges in the balancing acts and the arising tensions as an ongoing negotiation, they never question that it is women who bring tasks to fruition and without whose crucial intervention social and political narratives would simply lag and regress. Politics is a cause; science is one; feminism is another – together, the plays present the intersectional approaches that these highly significant British female playwrights of the contemporary period have pursued. In other words, we are dealing with bodies charged from the outside, but also from within. That is, the characters' motivations are both externally determined (by their commitment to a greater cause speaking more broadly, and by the use of certain technologies that serve their purposes – recording, laboratorial – speaking literally) and internally driven – the characters' own moral imperatives. Moreover, there is a significant unifying element that, ultimately, brings them together, in terms of genealogy, as well as the present: their concentration, from their unique angles, on mothering(s) and motherhood(s).

In *ANNA* (the name being a palindrome might remind us of the anagrammatic May/Amy link between mother and daughter characters in Hickson's *Oil* that I have also discussed elsewhere, emphasizing circularities in personal and collective histories [Angelaki, *Theatre and Environment*]), and *Mosquitoes*, motherhood emerges as the ultimate act: catalyst and accelerator, both cause and effect. It runs deep, and it is, also, what charges the body forth. However, it is worth noting that, with the exception of one character (Jenny) in *Mosquitoes*, we are not actually dealing with the pregnant body in these texts. Alice has long become a mother to a now teenaged son, whose difficult adolescence, and the ways in which Alice and Jenny's mothering instincts develop towards him,

loom large in the play. Both texts explore how the internal urge that motherhood, and, by extension, the filial bond, generate – and that the body fights for, against, and in response to – is a force to be reckoned with. In Kirkwood's gendered representation of science in *Mosquitoes*, it emerges clearly that the scale of the scientific experiment ought to be considered as no lesser than the personal one. Maternity, on the micro level, is its own Big Bang – as in the macro-level, it is this that births the earth. Both acts equally furnish, but, also, if we approach this from the perspective of overpopulation on the planet – or even the scientific risks involved in any large-scale experiment – have the potential to undermine the planet's wellbeing. Such concerns, bringing the private and the public together, are the ones that this essay will be departing from and engaging with.

Electrifying the Female Body / Nature and Nurture: *ANNA*

Hickson's *ANNA* is concerned with the ways in which the individual experiencing a political context such as that of East Berlin in 1968 is both part of a collective and an agent unto themselves; someone of whom demands are made; someone who is expected to conform so as to prove their value as a citizen. It is especially significant, then, that for Hickson the enquiry is not only politicized, but, also, gendered and classed: Anna and Hans belong to an aspirational middle class that exists within a certain institutional regime while, at the same time, advancing their own interests in terms of personal prosperity. Of course, as we come to see, one is profoundly interwoven with the other, and the obligations that come with being an active member of the party, as and when requested, must become accommodated in the everyday of the individual by default.

Because Hickson's play comes to these issues from a rightly gendered perspective, then, it is especially significant that the text invests so much to the illumination of the electricized female body both literally and metaphorically. To phrase this colloquially, in order to appreciate what makes Anna 'tick' we need not only concentrate on the technology that keeps her wired, her body and apartment bugged, but, also, the causality that motivates her actions. The electricity lies in agency and in disruption – Anna is motivated by avenging her mother's death; she may not have been able to do this as a child, but she is able to do this now, as a woman. The way in which Anna's body is wired, meanwhile, means that its innermost rhythms are captured in sound, its flutters and fluctuations recorded. Its fear, anticipation and desire are charged by electrodes, it seems, as we listen into the heightened form of speech and the tiniest sound.

All silences and hesitations become amplified. In the playtext, the process is explained as follows: “Binaural sound is a method of recording sound that uses two microphones arranged to offer the listener a stereo-sound sensation. Wearing individual headphones, the audience get a ‘sound close-up’. They listen from the ‘point of hearing’ of one character; in this case, Anna” (v). Further on Hickson goes on to define the soundtrack of the play – its voices and overall ambience – as “the sound of Communism” (v).

Such is our degree of intimacy with Hickson's lead character, and such is, then, Anna: both person and political instrument. She is charged from within, and from her sense of justice and its moral imperative, but she is also charged externally – her motions are hers, but they are also controlled by others. Anna serves her own agenda, to punish the man whose actions led to her mother's death, but also the state's: to frame and surrender a traitor to the authorities. After the party and Anna's performance have concluded with Anna's successful delivery of Christian Neumann, whose identity she has now exposed as Max Becker, foiling his plan to flee to the US, Elena, herself at an age where she might have been Anna's mother, and, in this context, her closest political collaborator, congratulates Anna. “For Mama”, Anna states firmly; Elena returns with: “For your country” (Hickson 82). It may appear that there is no room for emotion in such a mission, but, actually, it is all about an umbilical cord: connected to a body, and/or to a land. Anna's histories of belonging are impossible to erase. In the pivotal scene with Christian/Max, which merits the long quotation, when Anna entraps him into confession, we hear:

- ANNA. It's individualistic to be loyal to your partner before the state.
 MAX. Two people don't need anyone else if they're the right two people.
 ANNA. Do you know how quickly that kind of self-involvement makes a society dissolve?
 [...]
 MAX. But do you want your husband?
 ANNA. You can't build a country on want.
 MAX. Your party leaders are all want – they're living like kings in Wandlitz – they want for nothing while the rest of the country queue for food.
 ANNA. Was that dissent? Did anyone else just hear dissent?
 NEUMANN *comes close – close enough to kiss her.*
 MAX. I've missed you.
 [...]
 ANNA. You look like you did when you were a little boy. (*Beat.*) When the Russian soldiers asked you whether there were any women in the house, why didn't you just say no?
Beat.
 Instead – you led them to us. Why?
Beat.

We'd known each other since we were born. You were my best friend.
You promised you'd keep us safe. (Hickson 71–72)

Not many playwrights have charged the female body as Hickson has in the past few years. Here, the electricity is actual – we are talking about power that documents the body in real time in its minutiae, which are, however not mundane, precisely as the seemingly ordinary day on which the play's events unfold is not at all ordinary. As in the other recent plays by Hickson that this essay mentions in the beginning, the electricity is also physical, sensuous: this is a body that moves, recoils, stretches, occupies space, simulates, desires, stimulates and is stimulated. Hickson's eponymous protagonist in *ANNA* is both a person with a physical entity and a hologram, an elusive image that changes shape; this is a by-product of the fact that she belongs both to the state and to herself; her body is both hers, and an instrument of the regime. That same body that is a means of seduction and manipulation also experiences the physical symptoms of fear and anxiety.

The play, moreover, explores how the charged body experiences, as a site of agency, the awakening of a sensation in that space where surveillance cannot enter. It is the contention of this essay that even though Hickson's protagonist exists within a context of docile discipline where her body – in its intellectual and physical capacities – is consistently utilized by state powers, Anna's body itself in its sentient capacities is never fully docile. Moreover, in its desire, it becomes the site of resistance. A fact of particular significance to this claim is the way in which Hickson troubles the performances of subservience. At a crucial junction, Anna appears to – however momentarily – dither. Through such ambiguity, the play explores what might occur in cases when, even if knowledgeable as to its service, and perhaps in spite of itself, the body resists, not necessarily by means of reason, but, rather, of urge and instinct. After Anna confronts Max and their dialogue continues further, Hickson's stage directions read: "*ANNA kisses him – MAX kisses her back – it's gentle – it's forgiveness*" (73). A factor that renders such moments particularly intricate, as we see here, is the interjection of desire. Anna, in this part of the play, explores how it might be manifested, and what consequences this might carry, if urge and instinct are in fact proven to be part of the same process of reason, that is, factors towards the individual's decision making, as well as of its very undermining. The way in which Hickson's play develops, with Anna experiencing a brief gap before returning to the pursuit of her cause, suggests that the playwright is investigating the tensions arising between the individual's cognizance of the two sides that demand equal attention and, despite her performance of tightly choreographed systematicity, it allows the possibility of disarray. This might, perhaps, be understood as an act of con-

tained self-sabotage in one's designated function, perhaps as, even, an act of subversion of that same system to which one subscribes, and whose strict purposes they serve. It is at the stage of semi-cognizant disobedience while, otherwise, in a state of conformity that the body becomes electric.

I would like to turn, here, to the exploration of related concepts in Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* and, especially, "Docile Bodies". Foucault writes about the body as both "object and target of power [...] the body that is manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds, becomes skilful and increases its forces" (136). Foucault additionally notes that "in every society, the body was [we might add, here 'has been'] in the grip of very strict powers, which imposed on it constraints, prohibitions or obligations" (136). When Foucault homes in on literatures developed to frame the body's servile practices and potentialities in the seventeenth and eighteenth century (from the military to automata), his lexicon, however reflective of the historical paradigms, becomes strikingly relevant to the context that *ANNA* engages with. Despite the scale of control, which was very much universal and boasting a deep, impenetrable reach "it was a question not of treating the body, *en masse*, 'wholesale', as if it were an indissociable unity, but of working it 'retail', individually; of exercising upon it a subtle coercion, of obtaining holds upon it at the level of the mechanism itself – movements, gestures, attitudes, rapidity: an infinitesimal power over the active body" (Foucault 137). It is this methodology that, ultimately, delivers the condition of "docility-utility" (Foucault 137).

In Hickson's *ANNA*, within its performance of discipline, the subject allows a lacuna where control – external and internal alike – falls away. Foucault additionally identifies

The historical moment of the disciplines [...] as] when an art of the human body was born, which was directed not only at the growth of its skills, nor at the intensification of its subjection, but at the formation of a relation that in the mechanism itself makes it more obedient as it becomes more useful, and conversely. What was then being formed was a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures its behaviour. The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A 'political anatomy', which was also a 'mechanics of power', was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines. Thus discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, 'docile bodies'. (137–8)

The longer quotation is necessary in order to progress to the next stage of my argument, and of this essay more broadly, which involves creating a bridge between Hickson's play and Foucault's seminal text, and the more recent discourses developed by Tracy C. Davis in *Stages of Emergency: Cold War Nuclear Civil*

Defense (2007). Davis's interdisciplinary scholarship probes the link between performance studies and political science, historicizing the present through a consideration of past patterns and circularities in collectively challenging circumstances. The understanding of how the concepts of staging and emergency interact, how the latter is defined, and how humans develop strategies of adaptation are equally important concerns to Davis's argumentation.

I would like to begin with a reference to one of Davis's introductory statements, noting, as is essential, that Davis is writing in the aftermath of the first visible consequences of the post-9/11 political and civic landscape, including, of course, the War on Terror. As Davis notes: "We can now execute our part in the new protocols of civil defence – presenting laptop computers for scanning at airport security checkpoints, passing through metal detectors in federal buildings, and scrutinizing our neighbours' behaviour in response to the latest warnings of terrorism – and thus provide continuity with Cold War practices" (1). Davis additionally observes: "[...] civil defense draws directly upon the traditions and techniques of the stage: Cold War nuclear civil defense is not *like* something that is theatrical but is an embodied mimetic methodology that is *inherently* and *crucially* theatrical" (2; original emphasis). Davis's primary focal area is rehearsal. The way in which this is framed will lead me to my next point, and to a return to Foucault. As Davis suggests:

Rehearsal is invoked neither as a metaphoric motif nor an aestheticized product, but rather a technique and mode of doing [...] This was not the art and entertainment known as 'the theater' yet it was staged; this was not 'performance' yet it was performative, both in the sense of display and something that was done subject to evaluation. It could be spectacular, or not; well coordinated, or not; involve extensive predetermined activity, or not; depend upon fakery, deceit, and illusion, or not. (4)

Rehearsal is one part of the execution process, but the actual (performance) event is unpredictable, even if it appears to circumvent glitches, as it mostly does in the plot of Hickson's play when the crucial action for which Anna has been recruited, prepared and trained comes to take place. Anna's electric body, that is, performs broadly as expected: she surrenders the man she is supposed to. Still, we might argue that the "machinery of power" fails to infiltrate the most private of spaces, as discussed above. Therefore, as Hickson's play eventually reaches its finale, the operation complete, the human target apprehended, the 'guests' and fellow party members departed, an emotionally poignant moment is generated. Now that all has been revealed and Anna begins to justify the rationale for her actions, or "deceit", to her husband, the following occurs, when he engages with the recording of the events that transpired when Anna and Max were alone, in the crucial entrapment scene. Some of the

text here will be familiar to the audience (and intentionally repeated earlier in this essay), who witnessed the moment, but not to Hans, who is making a crucial discovery:

HANS *presses play on the machine.*

The recording:

MAX. But do you want your husband?

ANNA. You can't build a country on want.

Pause – HANS looks at ANNA.

Well you can't. Can you. I did it for us. I wanted us to be safe from...

HANS. From you wanting him?

Pause.

Can they still hear?

ANNA *reveals the wire that is on her person.*

It's on your body.

ANNA *nods, timidly – goes towards HANS in some way – touch/hug –*

HANS can't allow it.

ANNA *takes the cable that links her pack to her headphones and she holds it in one hand, she pulls the cable out. She takes the bug off her person.*

HANS *watches the apparatus come apart. ANNA puts it on the table.* (86–87)

On the table, naked, exposed, like the apparatus, lies also Anna and Hans's marriage. Where surveillance has not infiltrated through its mechanisms – literal and metaphorical – desire has. It is in the gaps in the recording – the pause, the absence, the space monitored but not captured – that Anna's body is *truly* electric. There are no wires for that, no listening ears – still, it is jolted all the same.

Electrifying the Female Body / Labs and Vessels: *Mosquitoes*

Mothers, bodies, science and technology shape the playing field in Kirkwood's *Mosquitoes*, each being given, I argue, equal importance and exposition, both as singular entities of individual significance and as interconnected qualities. *ANNA* is more compact in its action and duration, and *Mosquitoes* more maximalist, yet, ultimately, both plays are equally significant in their ambition for formal and textual rigour and innovation. *Mosquitoes* tells the story of two sisters, Alice and Jenny, their respective exposures to and with motherhood (including their fraught relationship to their own mother), as well as their varying re-configurations of intellectual and emotional intelligence. All action is set against the canvas of Alice's pre-eminence as a scientist, whose research at CERN holds the possibility of extraordinary impact on human life. As is noted by par-

ticle physicist James Gillies in the programme for the premiere production of the play, “Knowledge of the Higgs particle [discovered at CERN and of pivotal significance to the play, where it is anthropomorphized on the stage as ‘The Boson’ ...] allows scientists to model the long-term evolution and ultimate fate of the universe” (Gillies n. pag.). Meanwhile, in its quotidian applied function, technology carries its own substantial presence, for example, through the advent of devices (mobile and otherwise) that have radically modified our perception and access. Through the crisis experienced by Alice’s son (Luke) in his personal and school life, for example, it is shown as an agent for closeness and separation, but also for destruction and despair. I mentioned earlier that Hickson’s play is gendered and classed, and so is Kirkwood’s. In her text, we witness the implications of gender on one’s personal life, career, and the expectations broadly associated with these. Class, furthermore, is especially interesting in this play, as different stratifications become apparent within the context of one and the same family, where, theoretically, one would expect that siblings might be on a par. Jenny, however, has fallen behind; she exists in the orbit, but also, at the same time, in the periphery of her mother and sister’s respective lives, impacted by their scientific genius, which, however, she is unable to approximate, and much less match.

Staged at the National Theatre’s Dorfman, the same venue that accommodated – and was suitably adapted to – Hickson’s *ANNA*, Kirkwood’s *Mosquitoes* benefited from the intimate atmosphere (at least comparatively to the National Theatre’s larger auditoria, the Lyttelton and the Olivier) that often provides fruitful ground for the seeds of experimental plays to take hold, and to grow in momentum. As tends to be the case with some of the most important plays of the contemporary period in terms of posing significant questions regarding our relationship to our world, as well as to science and technology, *Mosquitoes*, too, appears to be ahead of the curve. Its engagement with vaccine scepticism (in this case it is the MMR, or Measles – Mumps – Rubella vaccine), as well as with mega-scale events (in this case the Large Hadron Collider) that have the power to forever alter life as we have known it, are the primary references in the play that would justify this claim in the context of the events that would follow three years later, and, especially, the large-scale, critical consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. One reviewer described the play at the time as “a drama of huge ideas – the need for logic and irrationality, faith and science, to co-exist together; the idea of love as a physical bond to the universe” (Lukowski); others observed that it “places the star-spangled, ever-expanding majesty of the cosmos alongside the lived experience of being a conscious human-shaped blob of atoms” and, specifically relating to the central relationship in the play, that between the two sisters, that “Like many DNA-sharing Homo sapiens, Alice and

Jenny act towards each other according to the central tenets of the universe; at times being a life-giving force, at others being instrumental in decay and destruction" (Waugh). And even though in terms of interpersonal connections – or, rather, attempts at these – there is indeed a central relationship, the play, in my view, also emphasizes the reality of singularity. There, each body carries its own electricity in terms of agency and scientific accountability, but it is, ultimately, charged from within. The possibility to connect with and/or to others is compromised because of the devotion to one's own cause, the atomic aspect of one's life: science; despair; survival in all its unmitigated complexity. Or, as one critic remarked, establishing a clear through-line between the play's personal and professional narratives of motherhoods and scientific experiments, "Every birth is a Big Bang" (Trueman). The charged function of the female body in relation to the biological act of reproduction is loaded with this kind of understanding in the play – and it is especially significant that, in Alice and her mother, Karen, we observe two generations of successful female scientists, one of whom still very much at the top of her game. Kirkwood, ultimately, provides a fascinating take on how the female agent – or actor – carries the possibility of creation and also destruction equally of oneself, one's child, or one's world – sometimes, indeed, all of them together. As I have previously discussed, a similar line of enquiry is pursued in Hickson's *Oil*, which, of course, otherwise is entirely different in its form and approach (Angelaki 2019).

If we are to talk about the female body electric in Kirkwood's play, and what it is that renders it so charged, we need to consider the two strands of the play equally: the private, which concerns characters themselves and their interpersonal relationships, and the public, which concerns two of the characters' (Alice and Karen's) scientific achievements and Jenny's sense of lack at the absence of any such (or any other professional) achievement of her own. With science and professional establishment, comes the charge of ambition; with motherhood, its prospect, its fulfilment and its devastation. This is witnessed in the play both in Karen's difficult relationships with her daughters, and especially Jenny, and in the shifting ground in Alice's relationship with Luke, whose teenage angst in a media-saturated age forms one of the most affecting sub-plots of the play. These conditions come with an emotional and physical charge. But whichever scenario applies – depending on which character we are dealing with – motherhood emerges as a live wire among the three characters.

When the play opens, we are confronted by the image of Jenny at advanced stages of pregnancy, vibrating with the anticipation of a much longed-for child (in itself the outcome of a scientific process, as it was conceived through IVF) as well as with a near uncontrollable anxiety regarding the successful carriage of her baby to term. In their conversation, Alice displays the scientist's compo-

sure – and an almost robotic self-control that is immediately juxtaposed with the buzzing disquietude of Jenny, “*always in motion*” (Kirkwood 9). Jenny is uncertain as to the effects of scientific advances on her baby (she fears the statistics regarding health issues for IVF conceptions, like hers; she has refused an ultrasound because of its potential invasive adverse effects), but she is resolute in her management of her pregnancy and her commitment to the well-being of the baby. The problem is that, in Jenny’s mind, it is science that emerges as the risk, and so she becomes a one-woman mission: to bring her baby to term against, as she perceives it, the odds. She is equally energized by becoming a mother and by resisting intervention of any form towards her child, voicing her indignation by admitting that she feels as though she is “constantly failing some fucking cosmic exam” (Kirkwood 10). Immediately, then, the pregnant – with a baby; with anticipation; with the future – body is transposed against a narrative much larger than herself, whose additional weight she feels loaded with.

The electricity of the body that carries this responsibility is revealed in Jenny’s indignant speech, where she questions the agency of others on her body, including uncomfortable procedures and examinations relating to conception and pregnancy, by rhetorically asking: “because actually at the end of the day who’s in charge? Who’s in charge?; / fucking, statistically, who’s in charge, / Alice?” (Kirkwood 10). The duality of the meaning here is fascinating: the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “in charge” as “used both actively and passively”, with an entry example of particular value: “e.g. to leave children *in charge* of a nurse, or a nurse *in charge* of the children” (*OED*; original emphasis). “Charged”, meanwhile, is defined as “Loaded, laden, burdened, filled, etc. [...] Now esp. = ‘Charged with electricity’” (*OED*). We observe all these usages in Jenny’s speech and body as captured in Kirkwood’s text; she feels both active and passive in the care and nurture of her baby, and she also absolutely feels entrusted with a load of significance, one much desired, which, however, does not mean that it is not, also, a form of burden. The reference to electricity establishes a bridge between the literal and metaphorical: this is how Jenny experiences her pregnant body. Alice’s account of her pregnancy, however, when probed by Jenny, is revealed to have been dramatically different: “[...] actually I felt. Sort of amazing. Like, tuned in to some weird frequency, because I understood for the first time. This is what my body is for, and it was like. Wow!” (Kirkwood 11).

The literal and metaphorical engagements with the concept of ‘charge’ persist throughout the play. When Jenny visits Alice in Geneva slightly over two years after the opening scene, she is in grief; her child has died, because Jenny refused the MMR vaccine. Jenny’s visit, however, coincides with a large-scale event in Alice’s personal and professional life equally: as Karen, also pre-

sent for the event, puts this, “The grand switching-on!” or “The first beam!” (Kirkwood 21). The reference is, of course, to the LHC: a process of charging in itself, which Alice is doubly charged by. That is, she is responsible for, as well as energized by it; this is the rush that runs through her body, or, as she tellingly notes to Jenny, explaining why she is not emotionally available to her on this specific day, which they are experiencing from radically diverse perspectives: “I’ve been working on this for *eleven / years*” (Kirkwood 22; original emphasis) to which Jenny retorts: “Eleven years, I know, eleven years, know what I was working on for eleven years? Having a fucking kid” (Kirkwood 22). As the scientific event is preparing to take place, Alice is questioned by one journalist: “Do you admit that the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) is not one-hundred-per-cent safe?” to which she responds “you can’t know that anything is definitely safe” (Kirkwood 25). The load of progress – of the experiment – is on a global scale, the play suggests, what the load of a pregnancy is on an individual scale: risks exist; things can go wrong, even if the odds are stacked on the positive side. It is interesting, then, that in the opening scene, addressing Jenny’s fears with growing impatience, Alice, ever the scientist, used more resolute language regarding ultrasounds, showing the kind of exasperation that she now reveals a hint of to the journalist, when she scolded Jenny: “(oh my God) it’s safe, it’s safe, it’s less dangerous than a hot bath” (Kirkwood 10). The play astutely reveals that the charge is, in scale, albeit in different contexts, comparable; and that the load can only, ultimately, be managed to a considerable extent. The difference is that Jenny carries the weight of her own world, while Alice carries the weight of the actual world.

The difference in scale, but also the complete similarity between the human and the greater-than-human is perhaps nowhere in the play captured more effectively than in this comment by Karen, which also provides context for the very title of Kirkwood’s text: “The language we [scientists] use. Impact, collisions. [...] When all we’re talking about is, what? The force of two mosquitoes, flying into each other” (26). While fully appreciating that Davis writes in a different context, I am also struck by the universality of her research in relation to crises that can be contextualized as both mass-scale and individual, and to its applicability here. In the second part of her aforementioned book, titled “Act Your Part: The Private Citizen on the Public Stage”, Davis discusses strategies of adaptation and continuation, sometimes in the face of the unknown:

Nostalgia for the camaraderie garnered by wartime coexisted with embodied memories of civilian efforts to survive bombing campaigns and a rigid determination to move forward, not back. Less concerned about Communists at their gates than memories of buzz bombs in their skies, Britons kept the onus of responsibility for defense early in the nuclear age on

those who protected more than just themselves [...] an active brigade of civil defense workers to learn skills and rehearse scenarios that put them to work in preserving others. [...] Anna Freud recommended equipping shelters so that children could *enjoy* the raid [...] If a child's task is to collect his or her teddy bear on the way to shelter so it will be safe from bombs, that is all to the good. [...] Nuclear preparedness, in other words, requires tolerance for repetition and waiting. Rehearsal does not evolve from ritual but rather ritual results from rehearsal. (109; original emphasis)

Elsewhere, Davis notes how, where emergency scenarios were concerned “In units as small as families and as large as nations, the public was exhorted to rehearse their responses to warnings of attack, becoming actors in a nuclear war scenario that was intensively practiced with minimal variation in plotting” (115). Everyday life becomes a form of performance as part of a greater regime, as a mode of managing the anxiety of the unexpected, and, finally, of developing strategies of conquering the threat, as well as the fear it causes. Everyone has a role, and the training is rigorous and consistent.

The way in which, in *ANNA*, the eponymous character and her mother attempted to shelter from the enemy in wartime was a comparable form of performance. In the face of that failure, the importance for the success of Anna's current mission is all the greater. The family unit, and, within it, the individual, becomes the keeper of the world. And, then, other scenarios emerge, whereby families actually manage the weight of this world from a position of even greater power in interaction with powerful accelerators, and of greater urgency. Such is the case in Kirkwood. The buzzing of mosquitoes, recurring in the soundscape of Kirkwood's play, sounds much like electricity; static, or flickering – equally disturbing, equally undesirable. The buzzing of mosquitoes is also an attack on the system; an event that must be managed. The bonding of camaraderie procured through shared crisis is not to be underestimated; it exists, Kirkwood's play shows us, also in siblings who have undergone considerable personal and professional stress, and who have supported each other as they weathered storms with the world looking on, and, indeed, depending on them. As Karen's function in the play also reminds us in her public success (her impressive *curriculum vitae*, which she even recites) and private failures (at one moment she performs a protracted smacking of Jenny), the family is the ultimate structure, whose actions have greater impact than in the four walls of the home. It is this adaptation and survival, whether through grief or failed experiment, that has created a determination to persevere – to move on to the next stage; to believe that this might even exist. The private and public roles are profoundly intertwined: once a person has accepted their broader responsibility, even by first acknowledging it on an individual scale, they have made a commitment to caring for others – both those closest to them and those much further afield. One, ultimately, sets out

to preserve, rather than destroy. Mothers and children have a role as important as scientists in laboratories; except, sometimes, they might be handling both roles simultaneously. Specifically relating this to Davis, then, the ritual of the rehearsal, as described above, emphasizes that a failure – however spectacular – increases the chance of accepting the process for what it is; it is the commitment to the experiment rather than the result that drives the effort. Patterns may repeat; some variation may be expected; better success rates may be accomplished, and the family, indeed, serves as itself, and as the nation, both at the same time.

In the final scene, the concept of charge returns in its visceral iteration, as we first encountered it in the beginning. Some time has passed. Alice and Jenny, following a crisis in their relationship and of course the individual crises they have sustained in their lives as mothers (the loss of Jenny's child; the errant behaviour of Alice's son Luke) are reunited. Jenny is taking a break from her job to catch up with Alice, who has come to visit her in the UK, returning Jenny's hopeful gesture of reaching out. As their conversation unfolds, always intimate, but, also, always tentative, Jenny reveals to Alice that she is pregnant again; a natural conception that means that, unbeknownst to her, Jenny was already pregnant when her first child died. Approximately halfway through the pregnancy, Jenny is now different; serene; having an ultrasound, which has revealed that the baby is "perfect" (Kirkwood 69), despite Jenny's excesses during her darkest grief and defying Alice's scientific logic.

As we approach the ending of the play, a long monologue lands that covers, among other topics, Jenny's sensation of her body through reference to her organs and her potential plan of moving to the country under the same breath as it questions her – by all accounts – inadequate partner's agency in decisions relating to her future. The monologue ends in familiar words: "cos actually who's in charge Alice?" ; / At the end of the day, Alice, who's in charge", to which Alice concedes "You are, Jenny. You are" (Kirkwood 70). The tone is markedly different from the beginning: a confidence has set in for Jenny and, with it, also, hope. Alice and her team, meanwhile, are working on repairs for the LHC, "Hoping to be online again within the year" (Kirkwood 68). The large-scale large experiment is being attempted again; so is the small-scale large experiment: a beam; a baby. At the end of Kirkwood's play, it is the soundscape that articulates the hope, along with the charge; the electrified body, as well as its cognizant and physical potential:

JENNY smiles. Puts ALICE's hand on her stomach. Holds it there. Above us and around us the whoomph of ultrasound waves as loud as a train coming into a station deafening, terrifying

*the sound of JENNY breathing
a hum of mosquitoes
and our heartbeat, growing louder
as the experiment begins. (70)*

The collective body rests their expectation on the individual body, and vice versa – the charge is real, and equal. The first-person plural chosen by Kirkwood here, where the stage direction refers to “*our heartbeat*”, is important: the individual, whether the scientist, or the pregnant body, carries forward the future of the community; within one subject, society, as ward, as charge, rests, breathing in and out – in trepidation, in excitement. It is not much different from the charged, amplified breathing of Hickson’s Anna that we hear at different moments in the play, and, especially, when she finds herself in a battle of wills as to how to handle Max/Christian. Anna is, after all, one of those children that, at a time of radical crisis, had to develop, rehearse and perform survival strategies; unfortunately, they did not fully succeed at the time, so they must succeed now. The cause lies within the person, and the person within the cause. Rehearsals and performances operate cyclically, their outcomes, ultimately, uncertain. It is in the effort, the adaptability, the agility, the ritual, where a prospect materializes.

Conclusion

In the essay “A Woman’s Place Is in the Lab”, science writer Meg Rosenburg discusses and historicizes the strides made by female scientists leading to breakthroughs that have forever shaped humanity. The wording Rosenburg uses when it comes to addressing the monumental discovery of Lise Meitner relating to uranium is especially striking given the concerns of *Mosquitoes*, the production in whose programme the essay appears:

By bombarding uranium with neutrons, Meitner proposed, a heavier uranium atom could be created synthetically. If this overstuffed atom were then to undergo beta decay – a neutron splitting into a proton and an electron – an atom of a completely new element would remain. When Meitner tried it out with colleagues [...], they were surprised to find that instead of transforming into a new element, the uranium behaved much more dramatically, breaking nearly in half to form two lighter daughter atoms. They had discovered nuclear fission. (n. pag.)

Reading Rosenburg’s commentary, and with no intention of anthropocentrism, but keeping to the dramaturgy of Kirkwood’s play that does give the Higgs Boson (here The Boson) a human shape, I am reminded of the cross-embedded-

ness between humans and science, and of the rich representational possibilities that this offers. In the premiere production of *Mosquitoes*, The Boson was depicted emphatically, but, still, rather conventionally in its human iteration; in the Vienna premiere of the play (Akademietheater, October 2021), directed by Itay Tiran, the unpredictable, even eccentric performativity of The Boson was considerably more pronounced aurally and visually, taking the shape of bold installation art that pushed the boundaries and exchanges between the human and non-human body in the face of experiment. Rather than use the human as an understanding of the non-human, then, perhaps we ought to reverse the logic. In my view, Rosenberg's wording establishes a fascinating link to the core plot event of Kirkwood's play: creation in all its iterations and consequences, but, also, gendered experiences of femininity, motherhood, filiality and sisterhood. The daughter atoms that split from the same core to unpredictable behaviours; the expectation that we might anticipate the behaviour of an element only to be surprised by its own agency. Such are the parameters that interconnect the two plays (*Mosquitoes* and *ANNA* respectively), and, at the same time, reveal the principles that pervade unprincipled bodies.

ANNA, because of its staging methods, mediates the body through technology. Anna is both herself and a well-rehearsed experiment in obedience and externally dictated performance that, despite its success, contains considerable unruliness. Our experience is not merely what we might describe as electric, because of the suspense that the real-time action of the play generates, but, also, electrical, as is the actors' – their sounds are technologically enhanced, while we wear headsets to follow the action. But there is more than that: the play ends on a cliff-hanger, whereby we cannot be certain whether, the truth exposed, Anna and Hans will survive as a couple. What serves as the log for the body is a mechanical device: her desire is captured on tape; her palpitations and hesitations likewise. At the end of *Mosquitoes*, we once more encounter the couple of Alice and Jenny: despite their differences, they resolutely gravitate towards each other. We cannot be sure whether they will remain in each other's lives, either – but they might. Our own heart, now, as Kirkwood's poetic stage direction notes, can only tell us what is the most likely version of this potentially shared future. After multiple rehearsals, as Kirkwood's play reveals, whether in conception, in parenting, or in the lab, events can still transpire outside of anyone's control, and beyond reasoned expectation and belief. There appears to be an inner rhythm – a charge – that does not necessarily conform, or, at least, not fully. As this essay has discussed, in both plays, there is a charge, in some ways similar, in some ways different. It is difficult, however, to imagine a disengaged audience that does not, at least in some form, share this charge. The textual forms and staging methodologies that both playwrights have pursued, as well

as their compelling subject matter, which takes to task some of the most shared threads in humanity, have fostered an environment of sensory and intellectual participation that functions on different levels. The seamless union between form and content that Hickson and Kirkwood accomplish in these works, combined with their scale of reference, strike me as significant, and, beyond this, ground-breaking, a major contribution to the ever-evolving traditions of experimentation in contemporary British playwriting.

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Elisabeth Angel-Perez

debbie tucker green's 'traumatic' dramaturgy

Abstract: Ever since she started writing for the stage, debbie tucker green's innovative dramaturgy has been turning politics into poetics. Her theatre elects poetry and rhythm as the only possible modalities of the political and allows for a viscosity of a different nature, based on verbal images and discarding graphic representation. *born bad* (2003) and *random* (2008) are built around traumatic perfor(m)ation and delineate a poetics that proliferates around a seminal refusal to stage and show straightforward violence. *ear for eye* (2018), whose meaningful title renounces seeing to the benefit of hearing, brings to completion this aesthetic project and in so doing deeply revitalises political theatre.

Introduction

The British artist of Jamaican heritage debbie tucker green, whose name, which she spells without capitals, displays her refusal of hierarchy and of rules, has been giving voice to a different kind of political music since 2003 when *dirty butterfly* premiered at the Soho Theatre. One of her most recent plays, *ear for eye* (2018), points to the paradigmatic shift that affects a number of contemporary plays (from Sarah Kane's last plays to Selina Thompson's *salt*. [2016]), somehow redefining the very prerequisite of *theatre* as an art based on what is shown and what one sees (*thea*, in Greek, means 'eyesight'). Her 'in-er-ear' plays bring theatre close to rap, slam and spoken word and promote a jolting lyricism, both realistic and distanced, which allows for the collective to be addressed through the individual. They reflect the heritage of a post-Beckettian theatre that spectralizes action rather than showing it as well as a filiation with Anglo-Jamaican and Afro-American poetry: in debbie tucker green's spectacular language, one can trace echoes of the bewitching rhythms characteristic of Ntozake Shange, Kwame Kwei-Armah, but also of Lauryn Hill's music (Goddard, "debbie tucker green" 191). Her theatre also throbs with the dub poetry of Linton Kwesi Johnson,

Note: "Traumatism" is a neologism coined by Jacques Lacan, bringing together trauma and its etymology (*trou*/hole in French) and the original meaning: 'wound'. This text is an English version of the chapter dedicated to debbie tucker green in Elisabeth Angel-Perez. *Le Théâtre de l'oblitération, essai sur la voix photogénique*. Paris: Sorbonne Université Presses, 2022.

for example, or with the spoken word flow of artists such as Patience Agbabi or Kae Tempest. debbie tucker green offers a feminine and postcolonial perspective on trauma and, like Sarah Kane, closely articulates the domestic and the historical¹. It is through an intimate approach that tucker green gives voice to the ethical scandals which, well beyond the individual subject, address our societies in crisis in a globalized world. tucker green constructs the suffering figures that people her universe as plural and choric subjects. *dirty butterfly* (2003) stages three lives as fragile as a butterfly's, all of them organized around a sexual aggression. *born bad* (2003), set in a black family, works on the theme of paternal incest and collective responsibility, somehow in the tradition of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970). The opening bars (in the musical sense) of the play feature a gospel song ('What a friend we have in Jesus') which relocates this intimate drama in the history of a people bruised by slavery. The very same theme of sexual aggression and 'property' is again developed, though on a different scale, in *trade* (2004–2005), which is devoted to sex tourism. In *stoning mary* (2005), tucker green's dramatic strategy consists in even more clearly promoting a plural, circulating subject: the play intertwines three stories: the stoning of women, child soldiering, and HIV-AIDS (also at the heart of *generations* [2005]) All three themes suggest the backdrop of an Islamist republic or an African dictatorship (Sierz 2011, 98), yet the play stages characters who speak a resolutely ethnicized language, whereas they are paradoxically said to be played by white actors: 'All characters are white' (2).

Within a few years, tucker green has invented a style that both opens up new aesthetic perspectives, and continues to explore the furrows already etched by her predecessors. She has developed a new dramaturgy, based on voice and rhythm, often in the form of a litany-like, melopoetic language, which informs each piece individually as well as the entirety of her oeuvre, which can be perceived as an organic whole. Ever since she started writing for the stage, tucker green's innovative dramaturgy has been turning politics into poetics. Her theatre elects poetry and rhythm as the only possible modalities of the political and allows for a visibility of a different nature, based on verbal images and discarding graphic representation. *born bad* and *random* (2008), for instance, are built around traumatic perfor(m)ation and delineate a poetics that proliferates around a foundational and seminal refusal to stage and show straightforward violence. *ear for eye* (2018), whose meaningful title renounces seeing to the benefit of hear-

1 Sarah Kane, about *Blasted*: "So I thought, 'what could possibly be the connection between a common rape in a Leeds hotel room and what's happening in Bosnia?' And suddenly the penny dropped and I thought, 'of course it's obvious – one is the seed and the other is the tree'" (Kane in Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* 101).

ing, brings to completion this aesthetic project and in so doing deeply revitalizes political theatre.

Nowhere in the visible

Of all debbie tucker green's plays, *ear for eye* most directly addresses not only the incapacity for traumatized individuals to actually represent or "image" their trauma but also the collective trauma of a literally negated population and in this respect, the play can be seen as a culmination of tucker green's dramatic strategy. Resolutely militant and ambitious, it denounces the barbarity suffered by black populations in the British, American and Australian territories where the effects of the abominable laws inherited from slavery remain. The first part of the play, replete with echoes and repetitions, stages African-American and Black British communities struggling with the day-after-day impossibility of inscribing themselves in the visible. The first scene of *ear for eye* takes place in the United States:

US.

African Americans.

SON – So if I put my hands up –
 MOM – a threat, threatening.
 SON – Slowly?
 MOM – Provocative.
 SON – Showed my palms
 MOM – inflammatory. Could be.
 SON –...(If I) raised my hands just to –.
 MOM – no
 SON – to just –
 MOM – no
 SON – but
 MOM – aggression (4)

A similar scene, the eighth in the first part of the play, takes place in the UK; same skin, same text, language both similar and different, especially through the presence of the caricatured father:

UK.

Black British.

SON – If I put my hands up –
 MUM – a threat, threatening.
 DAD –
 SON – Slowly?
 MUM – Provocative.
 SON – Showed my palms/then?
 MUM – Inflammatory.
 DAD – (*Quietly.*) fuck
 MUM – could be.
 SON – ...What if I raised my hands just to –
 MUM – no
 SON – to just –
 MUM – no
 SON – Dad?
 DAD –
 SON –
 SON – If it was only –
 MUM – aggression (52)

Finally, in the author's own production at the Royal Court in 2018, a transposition of the same scene into British Sign Language (BSL) radicalized the black community's retreat from the visible and from the audible: for them, there is literally no space to exist in, the obliteration is complete, which provokes an even greater revolt.

In this play concerned with weaving a continuum between past attitudes and their persisting effects in the present, the second scene reads as a powerful ancestral testimony: spoken or almost slammed by an older African-American "(wo)man" who acts as an elder and a sage, the monologue goes back up the chain of time and anchors the black community in the origins of history. Yet, the proliferating monologue, which seems to occupy all of the textual space, is structured around an ellipsis, that of the invisibilized community. At the centre of the logorrheic monologue, which runs over several pages, is a void, a gap, an inability to say, that points to the impossibility of being:

OLDER (Wo)MAN – Before the sun got cold (and) turn'd the
 skies to grey...
 Before the wind got busy and rain decided
 it couldn't be fucked to fall.
 Before the seasons decided they weren't
 worth changing

we wasn't worth the effort
 we weren't worth changing for.
 Before the green grass browned
 before the concrete could warm
 before the streetlights repeat their on-off
 on-off.
 [...]
 Before all that...

(Points to him/herself.)

(We were here.)

Before the dogs spat
 and the pigs barked
 and the people spat
 and the dogs barked
 before hateful eyes
 more hate-filled
 than mouths – and mouths which were
 overflowing with their...
 [...]
 Before before – . When –.
 ...Before –.
 Before all that... before alla that...

YOUNG WOMAN –

OLDER (Wo)MAN – I was here.

I was here – I was we was we (was) – I was, here (10–12)

As the note on the text indicates, the brackets – “(we were here.)” – materialize a text that is not said, but points to an “intention” to say. Language is muted, and along with it, the very possibility of existence. The incapacitated gesture of the first scene is reverberated by the impossibility for language to be voiced. Language proliferates around an absence, a hole that manifests the subject's and the people's inanity. The text therefore paradoxically builds up a climax in the shape of a deflation, of an ellipse, of an erasure. The fabric, or textile of the text – the textstyle – is pierced, “styled” in the etymological sense, i.e. perforated and thus materializes the open wound². tucker green's “troumatic” language is made of this withdrawal. Designated by an “it” whose referent is never explic-

2 The Latin word “*stilus*” designates the stylus with which the Romans used to write on tablets.

itly given, the mistreatment of black people in society is not given a name either. None of the violence or humiliation, nor any of these barbaric abuses that black communities have suffered throughout history are visually represented on this stage. Graphically absent, lipogramatic, this “it” inscribes the stigmata of barbarity in the language. Poetry, then, not unlike the songs in the cotton fields, takes over to give a body to those whose own have been obliterated, amputated, mutilated. Powerfully anaphoric, often alliterative and assonant, a visceral idiom is woven, one that carries within it the violence done to the body. Its syntax, its syncopated rhythm, the violence of its anaphoric aggression concretize both the statement and the denunciation. The iconic replica that inscribes the violence done to the body in the text reads as transposition, imitation, but also as resistance and counter-interpellation. Expelled from language, prevented from physical existence, the community can only be inscribed in another language, simultaneously naturalistic and magnificently poeticized. The obliterated body is relocated there, in this litany of sorts that speaks of suffering throughout history and gives substance to the community.

The second part features the only white man in the play. He stands as a paternalistic and ironic lawman who tries to show a black female psychologist that black people are always wrong. Finally, in the third part, a film is projected on stage. It features white men, women and children reading extracts from the Jim Crow laws and then extracts from the slave code implemented by the United Kingdom in Jamaica. The effect of these reconstructed archives, although a little didactic, is implacable and usefully complements the first two parts of the play. In this film, which gives voice to the executioners or to their descendants, nothing of the violence described is shown. The only spectacle is that of language: listening to see – “ear for eye”. Language is the tool of violence. The law is the tool of violence. By choosing to shift from theatrical language to film, a spectral art form if ever there was one, Debbie Tucker Green brings the spectralization of the martyred bodies to completion. Filmic images, which unlike theatre give not the presence of the body but its mere ghost, complete the obliterating process at work in the whole play. With this work, the playwright brings to perfection an aesthetic that she has been working on for many years: the voice, which stands at the interface between the tangible and the ghostly, the essence (*Geist*) of the body, bears in itself the entire body and opens up another visuality capable of showing the wound.

Photogenic voice

Similarly, *born bad* and *random* (2008) are vocal pieces: it is within and through voice that the drama is paradoxically incarnated in the body. Voice, all at once spectral, immaterial and prodigiously corporeal, is the paradoxical vector of what precisely can only be said by being silenced: trauma. In these two plays, incest and the son/brother's accidental death are the events confined to offstage, which haunt the mental stage unfolding before us.

random revolves around the off-stage stabbing of a black teenager in England. The play takes its cue from the many tragic events that took place in the UK in 2007³. Despite the two "parts" indicated in the script, the play is presented on stage as an uninterrupted continuum in which the interventions of the family members – SISTER, BROTHER, MUM, DAD – but also of the TEACHER and of 'others', are addressed to the audience in a frontal manner. The voices are interwoven in a long monologue by "one black actress [who] plays all the characters" (2). However, the voices ventriloquized by the actress are not trying to re-trace the event or narrate the action. The choric actress who plays all the parts is not a new version of the "messenger" who in ancient theatre comes to narrate the drama. The accident is never put into words; it is not the subject of any narrative, but conversely the fact that it is abstracted from language, which pervades the entire stage with a sense of loss. debbie tucker green is not interested in the factual story but gives it existence through the way events affect the people who receive it. There is only history for those who live it. As Elaine Aston writes:

[debbie tucker green's] dialogue is not written to flesh out event, dramatic detail or to offer audiences fully rehearsed backstories to the characters cast more often than not as unnamed daughters and sons, brothers and sisters or mothers and fathers. Instead, minimal and elliptical, the lines have designs on the audiences' ability to navigate their way through the emotional undercurrents of abuse, (s)exploitation, AIDS or knife crime" (Aston 196)

random juxtaposes the voices of the different characters, all of whom are simultaneously embodied and dis-embodied by the one and only actress on the stage: her voice both conjures and absents the characters she performs. The rhapsodic structure empowers the political message: the paratactic juxtaposition of voices, which all echo each other, weaves again and again the same motifs and rhythms (more of this *infra*) all the way to the middle of the play. It is only once the audience has allowed themselves to be lulled, even mesmerized by the incantatory

3 See Lynette Goddard's analysis, in which the play is read in the light of the Stephen Lawrence case. Stephen Lawrence was murdered on 22 April 1993 (Goddard, "I am a Black Woman" 123).

language of the text, that the tragedy is revealed. The oblique revelation spans over the end of the first act and the beginning of the second, thus cutting the play into two parts, at least in terms of temporality – there is a before and an after the experience of the tragic event –, while not altering the effect of continuity woven by the organicity of the voices and the text.

Like the rest of the action, the crux of the traumatic event – the death of the young man – seems to be dis-located: not only is the drama not shown, but it is not told either. Offstage, it is also off-text: BROTHER's death is the subject of no narration, of no announcement. It is purely and simply elided and paradoxically foregrounded thanks to this ellipsis. As in *born bad*, where the situation of paternal incest is never spoken out loud explicitly, the spectator is offered neither a visual reconstruction nor a narrative of the event. In *born bad*, DAWTA (THE GIRL), from the very opening line, demands that both the incest and the maternal complicity be acknowledged, as well as the reasons why her mother “made her play the woman when she should be playing the daughter”:

DAWTA – Say it.

Say it.

Daddy...

Say it. (3)

This withdrawal of language generates the whole play. While Sarah Kane moves from seeing it all (*Blasted*, *Cleansed*) to hearing it all (*Crave*, 4:48 *Psychosis*), tucker green en-graves the trauma in the unsaid. The fourteen tableaux of *born bad* are precisely articulated around an unspoken center and proceed in concentric circles. tucker green's verbal dramaturgy echoes the physical trajectory followed by the hooded bodies in Beckett's *Quad* (1981), circulating yet always avoiding the center-stage gap. The refusal to speak, far from denying the event, anchors it in the gaping hole of the text, and provides it a reality far more authentic than the symbolic one achievable through speech. The gaping hole tells us as much about the victim's trauma – and the obsessional palilalic poetics testifies to this – as it does about the traumatic incestuous act itself, equally repeated, hauntingly returning, not only for DAWTA but also for BROTHER. It is through its very ellipsis that the event most offends and inscribes its presence. The victims are prevented from becoming fully-fledged subjects by DAD's refusal, as shown by the first image proposed by the play: that of a chair described not as “empty” but, through a hypallage, as “solitary”(3).

In the space of the very short first scene of the play – only a few dozen seconds at most –, the refusal of the gaze (“In silence she demands that he look her in the eyes” [3]) continues to perforate the subject. DAD denies DAWTA the

being-looked-at that she needs. In Levinasian terms, we could say that refusing to see the Other's face, he does not disarm. The "warrior" does not take note of the vulnerability of the woman, whose protection and responsibility he, as a father and as a human being, ought to doubly assume.⁴

The same is true of *random*: the ellipsis, both visual and vocal, is the perfect *locus* for the young man's death. Absented from visual representation and from narration, the event is all the more authentic because it is only perceptible in the way it affects the characters. Instead of the event, what invades the textual space are the reactions of MUM (which run onto two and a half pages) and SISTER, when they hear of the tragic event:

MUM – Bout –
 can they come in?
 They still there
 lookin at me
 lookin at them
 they looking past me at him
 bout...
 'Can they come in ?'
 Two a them Police cars
 park outside
 our yard.
Right outside
 our yard.
 ...And all a my
 whys?
 All a my
 who's
 all a my
 where's
 all a my
 what's

4 The face is at the center of Emmanuel Levinas' ethical philosophy. To see the face of the Other, "le visage d'Autrui", is to discover the vulnerability of the other. This causes a sense of moral responsibility to appear: I can see the vulnerability of the Other and therefore I can feel the urge to destroy the other because I know I can do it, yet I also sense this vulnerability as an injunction "not to kill" (the face in its vulnerability seduces me towards both crime and non-crime). For Levinas, the experience of alterity is that of the vulnerability of the Other. This vulnerability gives me a feeling of responsibility: I perceive this vulnerability and feel responsible. This double evidence is what Levinas calls "the experience of the face" ("l'expérience du visage"): "The face of the Other disarms the warrior in me" ("Le visage désarme le guerrier que je suis"); a faceless world is a world where the face no longer retains its "disarming" effect on the warrior that I am. (Levinas, *Totalité et infini* 217)

and whens and whyfors
 rampaging all thru my –
 mind
 only come out as a quiet

...No (24–25)

The voice here, eminently photogenic, stresses (or augments) the image. Repeated over and over again, the picture of the dirty boots on the immaculate carpet strikes the spectator as a vocal close-up:

MUM – Dark boots an' heavy shoes
 inna my house.

On my carpet.

Dark boots
 an' heavy shoes –
 on my clean carpet –
 in my good room –
 in my front room –
 my visitor room –
 my room fe best –
 fe formal – not even fe family.
 Dark boots and heavy shoes –
 beatin down my
 for best carpet
 without a second thought...
 from them (26)

The repetition triggers the almost cinematographic functioning of language whereas the play avoids direct imagery (no action takes place on stage other than speaking). The text here “makes the image” in a very Beckettian process (Beckett 1988, 18): at this moment in the play, beyond MOTHER, whose voice the actress-narrator gives us to hear, or within her, what we actually see is the iconic representation of the aftermath and of the trauma. The close-up contains all the brutality of the elided announcement and brings back the murder itself as if by anamorphosis: these dirty boots on the pristine carpet are indeed the emblems of the blows that killed BROTHER. As if relocated to the heart of the image, the violence banished from the action in the play reinvests the discourse. As the “objective correlative” of both BROTHER’s death and of the announcement of his death, the dark boots on the carpet de-empathize, while at the same time re-empathizing, the situation of mourning in its entirety.

Voice and the ethical stage

The shift of “In-Yer-Face” to the In-Yer-Ear dramaturgy, which is representative of the return to verbal theatre characteristic of a certain contemporary stage, is not without consequences for the “spectatorial pact” (March *passim*). *random* elaborates a device based on the circulation of voice and on its non-essentialism. The textual regime brings to the stage, as already mentioned, a single actress, a protean character-narrator who in turn gives voice to the inner landscape of each protagonist in the drama⁵. The free indirect speech both conjures and absents the characters, thus placing us, in spite of a double degree of subsidiarity – unspoken trauma for characters not present – in a situation of embodiment. Nevertheless, the free indirect speech, reminiscent of the stream of consciousness that resonates in the musicality of Virginia Woolf’s prose, is homogenized by the actress alone on stage. Even more so than with Henry James or James Joyce, Virginia Woolf’s stream of consciousness allows for both a delegation of speech through the erasure of the narrator and a reverse movement that consists in clandestinely giving back a role to the narrator, which can be seen in the unification of the narrative fabric: the characters in *Mrs Dalloway*, for example, whether they are men or women, rich or poor, all speak the same language. In tucker green’s work, the text follows a double dramatic and narrative (epic) dynamic at the same time, which confirms that:

[s]ince the 1950s, the theatre has eventually, under the guise of the ‘interior monologue’, arrogated to itself a competence we would have thought would remain the privilege of the novel: the power to externalize the mental flow of the characters, to extravert the soliloquy... the monologuing characters who today impose themselves on our stages possess the particularity that they speak by remaining silent.

As if resurrected, “the soliloquy in the new dramaturgies,” adds Jean-Pierre Sarrazac, “rises from a mute body. It is, literally, transcribed from silence” (Sarrazac 130, my translation).

In *random*, the muted body – that of all the characters with the only possible exception of SISTER – is thus simultaneously represented and absent from the stage, thanks to an explicit theatrical protocol: a single actress donning all the parts in turn, without any change of costume, without any effort to recreate an illusionist theatrical situation, foregrounds the ancestral might of theatre, proso-

⁵ One could imagine that the performer is an incarnation of SISTER and that the rest of the play takes place in her mental space yet one way or another, what is of interest here is the nomadic condition of the voice.

popeic by nature, that summons what is not there. At once one and plural, the voice of the actress (the role was created by Nadine Marshall in Sacha Wares' production at the Royal Court Theatre in 2008) gives a corporeity to a text that has been reassigned in terms of identity but nevertheless speaks in a single voice, using the same words and the same syntactic turns of phrase. Just as in *born bad* DAWTA and BROTHER end up sharing the same traumatic space, in *random*, SISTER's text is partly taken up by BROTHER in an assonantal or even echolalic rhetoric that inscribes or en-graves blood kinship into the language:

SISTER – ...And the su'un in the air –
 in the room –
 in the day –
 like the
 shadow of a shadow feelin...
 off-key – I...
 look the clock. Eyeball it.
 It looks me back.
 Stare the shit down–
 It stares me right back.

(Beat)

...Till it blinded first – loser.
 Then changes its time...7.37.
 a.m.

So I –
 Give it my back –
 Roll on my front –
 Flex under the duvet –
 An lie there on the reluctant to get up –
 A rubbish night's sleep
 A restless night's sleep
 For no reason at all.
 Birds bitchin their birdsong outside.
 People already on road.
 Dogs in their yards barkin the shit outta
 The neighbourhood (3)

BROTHER – 7.38
 a.m.
 Lay bad. Slept bad. Stretch (*choops*) –
 Don't help.
 Birds sweetin their birdsong outside. Nice.
 People already on road.

Neighbourhood Stafs barkin the shit outta
 The area.
 Sun doin what I do –
 Five more minutes –
 Ent read for the up.
 And the su'un in the air –
 In the day –
 In my room...
 7.41
 a.m. (4).

The same words, in a slightly different inflection ("birds bitchin" vs "birds sweet-in"), ricochet and weave the homogeneous and uninterrupted fabric of these "solo symphony[s]" (Kane 2000, 40)⁶.

Despite its syntagmatic linearity, the rhapsodic structure of the text – the fabric of the text is a continuous patchwork of paratactic monologues (SISTER's, then BROTHER's, etc.) – constructs a symphonic convergence and, rather than polyphony, chorality is the word that best describes it. The script thus circulates between the same-but-different voices and demonstrates that what tucker green is working on is the verbal and tangible proof of empathy, or even of the ethical encounter with the other.

What characterizes tucker green's practice here is that each character's voice is that of a biological other. The speaking body is not only mute, as W in Beckett's *Rockaby* (1980) for example, but absent from the stage. tucker green promotes a "disidentified" (Grossman 114–115), circulating voice, the authenticity of which is perhaps to be found precisely in the fact that it is mediated. In *random*, only mediation allows MUM or SISTER to express their inner landscape. In *random*, the trauma obliterates the character that can only exist in a relayed speech. Not only is the traumatic event eradicated from being said or seen, but those in whose flesh the trauma is imprinted are also erased from the visible and audible scene. Only the distancing, through the voice of the other, makes it possible to express what is felt, which a voice directly emanating from the biological body could not achieve. This distancing materializes on stage the circles of simulacra that keep the traumatic subject away from the revelation in language. The intimate self of the characters can only be revealed through the mediation of a narrative voice, epicizing the drama, which is in turn – since the voice plays at being the other – re-dramatized. If the play were an opera, this could be called a confusion between the recitative and the aria, the voice of

⁶ On this aspect, see also Hélène Lecossois in Page 175–187.

the actress on stage simultaneously vocalizing the intimate self of the character and its narration.

Eliding the traumatic event as well as the character on whom it is imprinted allows for a certain fluidity and conveys a poetics based on disengaged identity whose political and ethical significance is particularly innovative. The obliteration of the character's corporeal presence (body and voice) facilitates the sharing of problems and responsibilities. The circulation of voices authorizes empathy and opens up the ethical scene. It foregrounds a precise political project that aims at questioning the ethnic borders of language and, beyond that, of the world. In *random*, the non-representation of the character's body, mediated as it is by the sole black actress, allows for ethno-linguistic blurring: anticipating the British and American scene of *ear for eye*, a circulating language is constructed step by step. Like the opening lines quoted here, the play appears to be written in a clearly Jamaican English that oscillates, or rather brings together, Britishisms and Americanisms. Words like 'duvet' or 'rubbish' ('quilt' and 'trash' in African American or American Caribbean) anchor the text in a British context, as do spellings such as 'ent' ('aint' would be more likely in African American). A transposition of the British Jamaican accent is perceptible in the doubling of vowels and in the omission of the middle consonant ("su'un" for 'something') and also in transitive constructions of verbs that are in principle intransitive ("look the clock"). Expressions such as "mekin me shiver" clearly reflect the erasure of diphthongs in Caribbean pronunciation, and in particular in Jamaican pronunciation, whether in England or the United States. Similarly, the elision of the 'g' as in "feelin" is more frequent in Anglo-Caribbean English than in Afro-American English, where the apostrophe is the rule, except, sometimes, in texts written by women: women often avoid using apostrophes so that the word is whole and not truncated⁷. This voice, which carries plural identities, thus constructs a multiple or plural subject, or at least a labile subject. Ethnic micro-alterations blur the origin and construct not a subject bearing traces of its roots, but a post-national subject. The hybrid language meanders between British English, Afro-American and Caribbean English, and invents a globalized subject where the rich and the poor, the North and the South, are comprehended simultaneously. Because it summons and conjures up the body, and because it is always the voice of the other, the voice of *random* challenges essentialism, deconstructs binary oppositions (black/white; male/female) and brings about a la-

7 I would like to thank Monica Michlin (Université Paul Valéry- Montpellier 3) and Kerry-Jane Wallart (Université d'Orléans) for their precious help.

bile, pluri-ethnic, globalized subject, thus renegotiating the “performance contract” (March *passim*) in terms of active and empathic responsibility.

Promoting a disengaged identity is a recurrent practice in debbie tucker green's dramaturgy: in *nut* (2013), black and white voices share many inflections, thus contributing to dismissing identity assignment and to foregrounding the necessary globalisation of issues and sharing of responsibilities. In this piece, black ELAYNE and white AIMEE speak the same language. In *stoning mary*, as mentioned, white actors deliver Jamaican-accented lines:

YOUNGER SISTER – So what happened to the womanist
bitches
...the feminist bitches?
...The professional bitches.
What happened to them?

What about the burn their bra bitches?
The black bitches
the rootsical bitches
the white the brown bitches
the right-on bitches
what about *them*? (61–63).

The defamiliarising effect of having white actors vocalize black voices makes vocal dis-essentialism blatant. More surreptitiously, vocal circulation – although not deconstructing the black and white binarity – is also found in *random*. In this play, the Brechtian alienation effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*) is redirected towards empathy and responsibility (Aston 195). In *random*, just as the voice of a single actress inhabits several bodily and psychic realities, the same voice carries several topological and identity referents. The paradox of this diction consists in stylising and emblematising only to make things more realistic; it introduces defamiliarization and disrupts illusion only in order to paradoxically identify as closely as possible the realistic accents of the spoken word. The stage thus becomes a place for sharing, the very place where the encounter with the Other takes place: an ethical stage, in the Levinasian sense. This scene makes the face of the Other appear, not by showing it – since debbie tucker green does not show the characters nor their faces and Levinas claims that the best way to “see the face of the Other consists in not even noticing the colour of their eyes” (Levinas 1984, 79, my translation) – but by delivering it, in all its “nakedness”, through a mediated and circulating word.

“Infra-language”, “minor literature” or poetry as politics

Finally, by opting for aural theatre and renouncing graphic and mimetic representation, *random* blurs the boundaries between literary genres. debbie tucker green explains that when she starts writing, she does not set a formal frame for herself to write in. She talks about “a voice in [her] head that won’t go away and turns into little bits of writing that [she] link[s] together”: “I never deliberately set out to write a play [...] I just have fun writing stuff [...] I don’t know if it was a poem, song lyrics or a play” (tucker green, qtd by Gardner). A true “play-poem”, to take up a phrase Virginia Woolf coined to designate *The Waves* (1931), *random* is again representative of the rest of the corpus. The text is sparse and precious, running vertically, in the form of a poem or song. The choice of oralisation, which transcribes in the text the languor of certain syllables (“su’un” for something) or the obliteration of certain diphthongs (“mekin”) or finals (“feelin”, “outta”) before being the mark of an ethnic language, inscribes the text with a musicality of its own which transcends the *logos* in favour of the *phonè*.

The alliterative and assonant quality of the text (“shadow of a shadow”, “look the clock”, “Birds bitchin their birdsong”), exacerbating the hypnotic dimension of the signifier, enhanced by the iterative and often anaphoric rhetoric of the text (“A rubbish night’s sleep / A restless night’s sleep”), radically contrasts with the naturalistic flow while at the same time closely pinpointing everyday life. The lexical choices confirm this approach. The rare use of unusual direct transitive forms (“look me”) or the imaging power of the language (“eyeball me”), which recalls the proximity between poetry and the new urban languages with their explosion of vitality, construct a text that is both elaborate and artistic, yet which paradoxically becomes the very *locus* of realist speech. As Lynette Goddard writes, debbie tucker green creates a paradoxical poetics that invites us to rethink realism in theatre. She composes “phonetic and rhythmic lacunar dialogues, at once stylized and eminently realistic in their ability to capture the way people really speak with overlapping speech and often truncated and incomplete sentences” (Goddard, “debbie tucker green” 193).

tucker green does not poeticize reality: this would turn theatre into a politically futile utopia. Instead, she detects the deep, intimately poetic rhythms of natural speech: “Listen to a group of children – they repeat over and over again [...] ‘it’s hot there... it’s hot isn’t it?’ In the blink of an eye you have half a page of dialogue” (Aston 196). Her play-poems create a kind of metalanguage, a language within a language, with an exacerbated musicality, and dig up the

realistic accents of popular speech at the very core of the poetic vein that is expressed:

SISTER: [...]This ent a morning to be peaceful
and the somethin in the air –
in the room –
in this day –
mekin mi shiver –
even tho my single duvet
is holdin onto me like my man –
who still don't phone –
should be (3–4).

Simultaneously fluid and jolting, the play-poem gives voice to silence and pauses, breaks grammatical constructions and, in short, deregulates language. The proximity to Lauryn Hill ("Zion", "That Thing", etc.) is disturbing. Director Sacha Wares comments: "debbie writes with a particularly acute sense of two things: layout and punctuation. And it's really like a musical score" (Aston 197). Lyricism here defines the contours of a "minor literature" in the sense of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, that is, a literature created by a minority in a major literature⁸. All of tucker green's plays give voice to this minor literature, which is strongly embodied and historically and politically anchored. In *born bad*, for example, from the second scene onwards, the rhythms and sounds circumscribe a space of their own within the major language:

DAWTA –
If yu actin like a bitch
I'm a call yu it
if yu lookin like a bitch
I'm a call yu it.
If yu lookin like a bitch as you lookin on me – I see yu and yu bitch ways – mi a go call you
it again mi noh business.
Watchin yu watchin me like the bitch bitch yu is. (4)

This musical language which boasts the poetry of urban speech possesses all the qualities of this "minor literature": "deterritorializing", creating a space for itself within the dominant tongue, it is political in every way. The personal level can only be thought of through the prism of the collective, the individual through

⁸ "The three characteristics of minor literature are the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation." (Deleuze and Guattari 49).

the prism of the group. The lines spoken by DAWTA, who significantly bears the name of her function, are a collective utterance and produce an “active solidarity”. This language is a community.

Within the dominant language, debbie tucker green opens up a space of freedom that escapes the hegemony of the visible in order to create an “infralanguage” (Sarrazac 132) that corresponds as closely as possible to the traumatic bodies and souls of her characters. debbie tucker green’s urban poetry is characterized by its anarchic grammar and unbridled lexical inventiveness: at the same time over-elaborated and imbued with the greatest realism, the verbal music of her plays reconciles defamiliarization and naturalism.

In a double movement that both denies the stage image and yet reconvenes it, debbie tucker green’s musical scores allow us to think of voice not only as a synecdoche of the body but as its very essence: voice as a “meta-body” (Cohen-Levinas 41). Voice is both a triumph of corporeality and a refusal of bodily materiality. Spectral, caught between the flesh of the word and the intangibility of sound, voice opens up a fourth dimension for the stage.

Within these niches of individuality, the modern, globalized, eminently political and ethical subject is recomposed: a subject impossible to represent visually, but which must be made to come into existence in another way, in the completeness of an inclusive, supportive and complex language. And it is on the premises of a (re)composed global identity that the text strikes the spectator with all the power of its phonetic and verbal violence.

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“Who Gets to Speak and How?”: Staging Autofiction in Debris Stevenson’s *Poet in da Corner* (2018) and Ella Hickson’s *The Writer* (2018)

Abstract: This chapter identifies autofiction as a genre that has garnered significant popularity in British theatres in recent years. Specifically, it points to a new wave of women playwrights that bring an explicitly fictionalised version of their identity and lived experience into their writing and/or performing to engage with issues of social justice. It offers first an overview of autofiction’s literary theorisation, then a discussion of its underexplored relevance to drama and theatre, and finally an analysis of two plays, both of which premiered in 2018 in London: Debris Stevenson’s *Poet in da Corner* (Royal Court Theatre), and Ella Hickson’s *The Writer* (Almeida Theatre). The analyses focus on the plays’ self-reflexive structure, which—predicated on a range of metaleptic devices—bleeds into and interacts with each work’s paratext. They thus shed light on how autofiction is being adopted on stage, particularly by playwrights who identify as women, to foreground the limitations, histories, and implications of the right to speak they have been granted, and to interrogate how these factors inform the ways they use it. The conclusion thinks through the apologetic undertone these expressive choices at times betray, and reads their specific form of always undercut sincerity as a representational impasse of our crisis-ridden times.

Introduction

The new millennium has seen self-storytelling become a ubiquitous discursive mode across an array of fields and media, ranging from TED Talks, grant applications, and political spin, to news columns and literary practices. Within the latter, and alongside a boom in more ‘canonical’ forms of life writing such as memoir and autobiography, autofiction—understood broadly as an *explicit* blend of autobiographical writing and literary fiction—has been enjoying remarkable popularity, testifying to a societal hunger for self-reflexive narratives of self (Gibbons; Dix; Cooke).¹ This is true not only of literature, but also of recent playwright-

¹ Though a fascinating terrain of investigation on which work remains to be done, the collective

ing, which has seen a surge in writers and performers staging more or less fictionalised versions of ‘their own story’.

As the historic “powerhouse” of new British playwriting, the Royal Court Theatre in London is an obvious place to look when probing new trends in the field and industry (Billington). And indeed, a quick glance at the critically acclaimed shows produced at this institution in the lead-up to the COVID 19-induced lockdown of theatres can testify to the popularity of autofictional plays—particularly those authored by women and dealing with representation across gradients of power and privilege. Selina Thompson’s *salt*. (2018), Sabrina Mahfouz’s *A History of Water in the Middle East* (2019), Nicôle Lecky’s *Superhoe* (2019),² and Debris Stevenson’s *Poet in da Corner* (2018), all staged at the Royal Court, testify to how the cutting edge of socially and politically engaged playwriting by women has found a new timeliness in autofictional form, showcasing work that is predicated on, and often splashily marketed as, a partial fictionalisation of the writer’s (or performer’s) identity and lived experience.

Though autofiction has been extensively discussed within and outside the academy (Clark)—principally in literature (Dobrovsky; Jenny; Dix), but also in film and visual art (Wagner-Egelhaaf)—surprisingly little has been written on its presence in theatres and on British stages in particular, with the notable exception of Élisabeth Angel-Perez’s work on Tim Crouch.³ This has meant that a trend in contemporary British playwriting has gone thus far unnoticed. Indeed, while significant research has been done, for example, on the intersection of autobiography and the performing arts (Heddon) and on various forms of self-storytelling in solo performance (Greer), the referential ambiguity of autofiction, grafted onto the staging and performing of works of theatre, has yet to be explored in the scholarship.

While acknowledging the presence of an all-female autofictional turn in the Royal Court’s programming under artistic director Vicky Featherstone, this chapter considers women’s autofiction across institutions, pointing to a broader trend to begin to remedy this gap in the scholarship. Focusing on two case studies, both of which premiered in London in 2018 to great critical acclaim—Debris Ste-

needs and wants undergirding autofiction’s perceived timeliness lie outside the remit of this chapter.

² Lecky’s is a rather complex case, as I explore in detail in my discussion of authenticity (Goodling and Mark).

³ Angel-Perez identifies the autofictional aspects of Tim Crouch’s plays as integral to their overcoming of the post-dramatic and consequent affirmation of ‘post-post-dramatic’ or ‘neo-dramatic’ theatre (“Back to Verbal Theatre”; “Écrire après la mort”). Deirdre Heddon also touches very briefly upon the issue when discussing the work of Tim Miller (13).

venson’s grime musical⁴ *Poet in da Corner* at the Royal Court, and Ella Hickson’s *The Writer* at the Almeida Theatre—it explores how autofictional writing is being adopted on stage, by women in particular, to interrogate the limitations, histories, and implications of the right to speak they have been granted.

Autofictional plays are far from a prerogative of female playwrights. That said, in the new wave of autofictional writers that bring their own lived experience into the fictional dimension of their playwriting with the aim of engaging with issues of social justice, straight, cisgender men have been—to put it mildly, and for obvious reasons—a minority.

It is worth noting from the outset, however, that when one brings an intersectional perspective to bear on autofictional production, the gender divide loses its primacy. What is at stake is then perhaps less to do with gender in the absolute than with differentials of power and privilege, consequent access to the cultural markets, and the possibility within them of ‘speaking for oneself’. Autofiction can thus be understood more broadly as a popular choice for voices emerging out of, and grappling creatively with, a lived experience of historical and/or ongoing silencing and marginalisation, both socio-economic and cultural. It is the latter in particular that becomes the focus of autofictional probing. Indeed, when invited to speak, many writer-performers use their work to reflect on this invitation, its spoken and unspoken constraints, and its histories. Bran Nicol points to this as a distinguishing feature of anglophone autofiction, in contrast with its French counterpart: work in this vein is interested in exploring less “the complex workings of memory and their effect on subjectivity”, at the centre of many French writing considered paradigmatic of autofictional practice, than “the conditions of authorship, especially institutional”, undergirding the work’s production (257).⁵ Shedding light on these conditions of authorship and access to the cultural industries from a gendered, classed, and/or racialised perspective—as is the case, for example, in Arinzé Kene’s play *Misty* (2018)—has been the focus of an array of autofictional works in the anglophone sphere.

At the heart of this chapter is an understanding of the analysed plays as self-reflexive stories or self-conscious acts of storytelling, which—in their engagement with social justice—take seriously the role of narrative in shaping people’s aesthetic, ethical, and political judgement. In investigating their conditions of

⁴ Grime is a British hybrid of rap music that emerged in London in the early 2000s. First broadcast on pirate radio stations, it has since entered the mainstream, as demonstrated for example by grime pioneer Dizzee Rascal’s performance in the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in London in 2012.

⁵ Nicol refers here to American autofiction, but a similar preoccupation is palpable in many British works, including those considered in this chapter.

authorship and how these influence their form and content, in other words, staged works of autofiction often interrogate their own complicity with and/or resistance to what narrative theorists refer to as the “narrative grammar” of their community, placing their own “narrative syntax” under constant scrutiny and erasure.⁶ This is achieved principally in their structural deployment of narrative metalepsis, which serves to disrupt reassuring distinctions between the real and the fictional. Defined as “a deliberate transgression between the world of the telling and the world of the told” (Pier), metalepsis indicates a slippage between narrative levels, which disturbs the distinction between them (see Genette, “Narrative Discourse” 88). Similar devices can blur the boundaries between the real and the fictional world, as in Phoebe Waller-Bridge’s audience addresses in *Fleabag*, in which the protagonist breaks the fourth wall to comment on the story; or they can disrupt “the threshold of embedding” *within* the fictional world, for example when the characters of a story within a story break free and join the framing story or vice versa (Genette, “Narrative Discourse” 88). By reading this self-reflexive mode, through the lens of narrative studies, as a theatrical form of meta-narrativity, this chapter takes up Nicol’s invitation to consider anglophone autofiction “in relation to the self-reflexivity which characterised postmodern fiction and currently characterises our post-postmodern era” (257).

After a rapid overview of autofiction’s literary theorisation, the following section provides some reflections on its underexplored relevance to drama and theatre, and a few, tentative suggestions concerning the identification and analysis of autofictional plays. This is followed by a discussion of the two plays in context, exploring how their specific representational choices resonate with the question raised by Chris Kraus in *I Love Dick* (1997)—one of the founding works of anglophone autofiction—“who gets to speak and why?” (146), which I propose to rephrase, for the purposes of this discussion, as “who gets to speak and *how*”?

⁶ Yves Citton’s politicised reformulation of a range of narratological frameworks, for example, proves useful in understanding the plays’ self-consciousness as narrative texts. For Citton, the social circulation of stories, in analogy with language(s), is a signifying system in which familiar plots shape and orient—often imperceptibly—a community’s understanding of their circumstances, by habituating receivers to narrative patterns. This alerts them to particular aspects of their surroundings at the expense of others, encouraging them to form meaningful connections between them. A narrative grammar’s “units of syntax” are thus at once rooted in well-established habits and conventions, *and* susceptible to incremental modifications able to shift, in time, a community’s “semantic horizon” (Citton 107).

The Theatre of Autofiction

Originating in literary studies, the term "autofiction" was first employed by French writer Serge Doubrovsky on the back cover of *Fils* (1977) to describes writing that, while explicitly rooted in the lived experience of the author, takes its leave from the absolute claim to truth characterising autobiography or other more 'canonical' forms of life writing. For Doubrovsky, autofiction rests on a "pact" between reader and writer that is a hybrid of the "fictional pact" undergirding novels and what Philippe Lejeune famously defined as the "autobiographical pact", regulating works whose writer, narrator, and protagonist coincide (see Doubrovsky 176). In the latter, writer and reader agree that the narration is an earnest attempt to reconstruct events *as they took place*, and there is no tolerance for varying "degrees" in the identification of author and protagonist (Lejeune 13). "The autofictional pact", on the other hand, does tolerate "degrees" in this identification, demanding instead that "the author is not honest, but sincere; s/he will lie, but in an attempt to reflect the world with justice" (Ferreira-Meyers 28). A writer of autofiction, then, "at once asserts that what they are narrating is true, and warns the reader against buying into this belief. As a consequence, every aspect of the story oscillates between its factual and its fictional valence, leaving the reader unable to distinguish between the two" (Jenny, translation mine).

Building on its French origins, the genre has stoked academic and popular debate worldwide, catalysed by the scandal-ridden reception of bestsellers such as Karl Ove Knausgård's six-volume epic, *My Struggle* ([2009–2011] 2012–2019), for which no detail of the author's life is too intimate or mundane, or Édouard Louis's *History of Violence* ([2016] 2018), which recounts the author's experience of sexual assault and was adapted for the stage at Berlin's Schaubühne. A 2018 edited collection on autofiction in English bears testimony to the increasing interest in autofiction studies in anglophone scholarship—following initial resistance, on which it reflects—and points to some of the most representative autofictional works in past and present anglophone culture (Dix). Here too, however, the focus is overwhelmingly on the novel (and its germane genres, such as historical fiction, illness narratives, the graphic novel, etc.) and, counterintuitively, no attention is given to the genre's presence on contemporary stages. This blind spot is counterintuitive not least in light of drama and theatre's vital contribution in reflecting (on) social conventions and shifts in the formation and performance of identity. Throughout its history, the theatre has provided an arena for communities to perform to themselves, narratively, processes of collective and individual subjectification and, by the same token, to reflect on the practice of doing so. And indeed, there has been no lack of dramatic autofiction in recent years, on

stage and screen alike. Wildly popular works such as Édouard Louis's *Who Killed My Father?* (2020)—whose success has carried it from page to stage—or Michaela Coel's HBO/BBC co-production *I Will Destroy You* (2020) testify to the pivotal role drama plays in the network of autofictional discourse, and to the overlap between autofictionality and an explicit, creative engagement in social justice. This chapter focuses on the gendered dimension of this overlap.

When historicised, the popularity of autofictional practice among women engaged in social justice struggles is by no means surprising. Drawing on Linda Anderson, Hywel Dix identifies the surge in women's writing as one of the core cultural contexts for the proliferation of autofictional work in the anglophone world (10). Wary of theories and writing practices that “herald the dissipation and evanescence of the subject”, writers who had yet to achieve “critical recognition for the cultural expression of female subjectivity” turned, in the 1970s and 1980s, not only to “life writing” and “auto/biography”, but also to autofiction, as genres that offered a way out of the dissolution of the individual at the heart of much post-structuralist and even feminist thinking and writing (Dix 10). The same occurred in autobiographical performance practices during the second-wave feminist movement (see Heddon 129).

Again in *I Love Dick*, Kraus drily remarks on the age-old commonplace, still rampant in contemporary culture, that distinguishes “the poet-men, presenters of ideas” from “actress-women, presenters of themselves” (177–178)—the irony being, of course, that a woman's self-presentation is precisely what Kraus's book has been received as. This is an assumption that has long haunted narrative works by women. As Alex Clark observes in *The Guardian*, women writers have long been “bedevilled by the expectation—from readers and critics—that their work is based in the reality of their own lives”, resulting on the one hand in “a treasure hunt for the ‘real’ in their imagined worlds”, and on the other in “a diminution of its importance” on its own terms. This chapter's analyses ask what changes when women *choose* to present not ideas but themselves (or rather, ideas *through* themselves), and indeed declare that they are doing so, thus inviting—or even orchestrating—the “treasure hunt” that follows. Further, they probe what shapes this self-presentation can take when it is not limited to print but occurs, rather, on stage, literalising Kraus's epithet in its performative embodiment. Finally, *Poet in da Corner* illustrates how, when it is the writer who plays themselves on stage, “the factual nature of the narration [can be] rendered all the weightier by the author's presence before us, which almost rules out the possibility of countenancing that s/he is lying” (Angel-Perez “Écrire après la mort” 450, translation mine).

In adapting the concept for the stage, I conceptualise autofictionality as a spectrum, ranging from quasi-autobiographical plays, declared as such—as is

the case in *Poet in da Corner*, described on the theatre's website as "semi autobiography and storytelling" (Royal Court)—to clearly fictional plays in which the protagonist is, however, to some extent equatable with the playwright, and this association is arguably encouraged in and around the play (as is the case in *The Writer*). The critical framework of autofiction thus proves relevant to a vast range of theatrical works, which share what Laurent Jenny terms "a shrewd questioning of the naïve practice of autobiography" (translation mine). The chapter's case studies exemplify opposite poles of the spectrum, united by the explicitly experience-based nature of the dramatic material's source, and—crucially—by declared deviations from that source. Indeed, as Karen Ferreira-Meyers notes, autofiction's defining trait, the blurring of fact and fiction, is made all the more resonant "when the author notes (in the text itself or in the paratext) that this is at play, or when the reader reads/accepts the text in such a way" (35), thus associating writer and protagonist as overlapping—if not interchangeable—entities. In the theatre, this association is arguably elicited when playwright and dramatis persona share enough by way of identity markers, idiolect, or declared experiences and intentions, or when a similarity becomes legible between the character's *textual* and the playwright's *contextual* performance of self, for example during interviews or in social media content. It occurs most obviously when plays are written in the author's "authentic voice", defined by Katie Beswick as the voice with which a writer writes "about a context or environment with which they are signally familiar", with the effect that "the playwright's own experience and history becomes tied up with the perceived authenticity of the story and this authenticity is often used as a tool for marketing the production" (98). To return to Clark's phrase, the "treasure hunt for the 'real'" within the dramatic material thus becomes, on the part of the spectator, not a means of discounting or diminishing the artistic value of the work, but a consequential way to engage with it on the terms the work itself has set out.

An autofictional overlap between playwright and protagonist becomes legible, I suggest, in the interaction between the plays themselves, their editorial paratext (playscript blurb, acknowledgements, etc.), and the works' broader, intermedia paratext, which includes marketing and accompanying online content provided by the producing venues, reviews, interviews, and the playwrights' social media presence, amongst other things. By qualifying these disparate materials as paratextual, I draw again on Gérard Genette's lexicon, advancing my loosely narratological locating of these works (as social acts of storytelling) within discursive networks. Undergirding this is the acknowledgement that the societal circulation of these plays—the attention they are able to command—is predicated on these discursive interactions: simply put, a play is not received in a vacuum. The notion of paratext thus serves to foreground the framing and justi-

ying functions of these materials, which orient and inform their reception, and are a crucial terrain of expression in autofictional work. For Genette, the paratext is a permeable “threshold”; it is,

as Philippe Lejeune put it, ‘a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one’s whole reading of the text.’ Indeed, this fringe, always the conveyor of a commentary that is authorial or more or less legitimated by the author, constitutes a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of *transaction*: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public [...]. (“Thresholds”, 1–2)

Written at a time when paratext was limited to the realm of Gutenbergian possibilities, with nothing eluding the concreteness of the book-object in print, Genette’s description of this liminal “zone” or “fringe” of transactional and strategic exchange becomes all the more evocative in the digital age of content marketing, consumer profiling, and performance of self on social media. Indeed, as Patrick Lonergan points out,

playwrights, practitioners, and theatre companies all use social media as a performance space [...] Such performances can confuse the distinction between public and private, between the individual and the institutional, between the authentic and the commoditised and, perhaps more importantly, between performances that are staged within the theatre and performances that occur outside the theatre through marketing. (67–68)

Self-fictionalising acts on stage, in other words, are constantly flanked by off-stage performances of self, which influence and complicate the reception of autofictional works. In this sense, the playwright’s voice, recognisable across (staged and printed) text and (virtual) paratext, gives rise in itself to a form of narrative metalepsis, by disrupting clear-cut boundaries between reality and fiction.

This overarching or genre-specific ambiguity, however, is not the only metalptic device in the plays discussed. Rather, it is often by further undermining the fictional world of the drama that these plays stage and address the power differentials that have granted their author a platform, whilst having long excluded (and indeed continuing to exclude) many who share the author’s experiences of gender-, class-, race-, and/or sexuality-based marginalisation, and policing or at least orienting how they *can* or *choose* to speak. It is in this sense that I read the practice of autofiction on the part of the playwrights in question as not only gendered, but classed and racialised, in its imbrications with a desire to acknowledge and attempt to transcend the restrictive power dynamics both framing the plays *and* allowing them to reach an audience in the first place. By signalling awareness of an unresolved problem in probing the right to speak and its politics, the self-consciousness of staged autofictional practice results, at times, in an apologetic tone, as illustrated by *Poet in da Corner*.

"Shall I Ignore or Use Privilege?": Debris Stevenson's *Poet in da Corner*

Poet in da Corner tells the story of how Debris, a young, dyslexic girl from a white, working-class background, escapes her Mormon family and finds her voice, identity, and sexuality through grime music, to which she is introduced by her childhood friend Saw Scaled or SS Vyper. Specifically, it is Dizzee Rascal's album *Boy in da Corner* that facilitates her journey towards empowerment, providing a blueprint onto which Stevenson maps and indeed raps her own story.

Compared to Hickson's play, *Poet in da Corner* is more straightforwardly autofictional. On one hand, the autobiographical source of the material is loudly advertised: in the script's editorial paratext, the artist acknowledges her family "for not disowning me for writing about our lives", while the Royal Court marketed the play on their website as a chance to "discover how grime allowed Debris Stevenson to redefine herself". In a number of interviews, the playwright is eager to discuss her family's response to the show, or lack thereof (see, e.g., Leftlion). On the other, the character of Vyper is merely "based on" a real person (Royal Court), while the show stages a clearly fictionalised disruption of the grime musical promised to the audiences. The theatrical material thus deviates substantially from any attempt to sincerely relay the real.

Not only is the material's fictionalisation evident, but it is also crucial to the work's ethos. Indeed, akin to *The Writer*, the structural and stylistic key to *Poet in da Corner*'s declared investment in social justice can be found in the material's deviation from and problematisation of its autobiographical source. This takes shape through its deployment of narrative metalepsis, which allows Stevenson to display her awareness of the ethical dilemmas undergirding what her work does and what is demanded of it. Through a sequence of metaleptic (and thus metatheatrical) moves, the disruption of her own autofictional narration is what vouches for its ethical integrity—or rather, for the closest approximation of integrity that the industry, under scrutiny, can accommodate. The work of staged metalepsis thus allows critical objections to be pre-empted and incorporated into the material, with what Jenny Turner describes as the characteristic "self-awareness of the post-crash newer-left academic-adjacent, with takes and attacks pouring into her from all sides, all the time" (27).

Considering the bare bones of its plot, *Poet in da Corner* tells a rather conventional 'rags to riches' story, which sees its protagonist move from a childhood of deprivation and psychological hardship towards commercial and academic success. Shaping its critical edge, however, is the character of SS Vyper, who first introduces Debris to grime and whom she leaves behind when she embarks

on her social ascent. In a narrative monologue at the play's opening, Debris recounts her first encounter with Vyper and offers a verbatim rendition of his greeting. It is here that the narration suffers its first metaleptic disruption, as an outraged Vyper bursts into the Royal Court auditorium, where *his* story is being told but into which he has not been invited. Vyper's intrusion acts as a framing device for the entire text: "So, you write a play (about me)", he says, "you don't even invite me...you don't even tell me...I get here, and you're even spitting my lyrics...right now. On stage. Live" (5). Debris tries to explain but panics; Vyper storms out. In another metaleptic twist, the audience are addressed directly by Debris's co-storytellers and asked to be patient as they attempt to coax Vyper back into the stalls and convince him to hear out his childhood friend. "We're never gonna get to the bottom of this if you leave", they explain, "she obviously wants to make things right" (7). Debris's autofictional narration then resumes, having established the stakes of what follows: an attempt to "make things right" through storytelling, with metaleptic disruptions serving to ward off a potentially immersive and feel-good experience and to signal its risks, compromises, and violence. Indeed, from then on, Vyper interrupts Debris at regular intervals, correcting her version of events: any immersion is short-lived, the metaleptic barrier continuously re-erected.

The longest and perhaps most revealing of these interruptions comes in the form of a rap battle. Debating the ethical and political stakes of Debris's autobiography, crucially, allo-fictional act, it is the most explicit in bringing the audience in on behind-the-scenes dilemmas, explored also in the play's paratext: "I was navigating other people's stories", Stevenson explains in an interview, "and in the show I address what that means, what are the prejudices, what stories do I have the right to tell, from what lens am I telling that story, as much as it might feel like mine – is it?" (Leftlion). Mirroring these paratextual musings in her sparring with Vyper, the playwright-protagonist voices awareness of her white privilege, through the realisation that "luck's got a colour" (59). "[A]sk the audience", she says to her friend, "why am I here not you?" (59). A hierarchy of suffering is then established between the two, with Debris's struggles with pansexuality and dyslexia trumped by racialised oppression and extreme poverty: "you just fight with your mother and / cry; I could have a fight in the street and die", Vyper reminds her (60), drawing a line between white and black experience. Grime is marked off as Vyper's racialised and gendered territory, which Debris has invaded and instrumentalised, predating its language to package her own story in the 'edgy' language of counterculture for the entertainment of Royal Court audiences.

Over the course of the battle, Debris's responses oscillate between the poles of self-indictment—"Yes, I fucked up", she admits, "Glamorized your plight—not

doing enough" (62)—and ever more confident attempts to defend the worth of her autofictional performance, her main argument being that *any* visibility given to the socially excluded is preferable to none. "When they had asked me, should I have said no?" (61), she asks; "[s]hould I ignore or use privilege?" (60). Debris's reiterating of the oft-pedalled social justification of art, however, falters when confronted with the reality of Vyper's exclusion:

[...] you're just standing here;
 appropriating our culture and acting
 innocent; either that or you're choosing
 ignorance; nobody here's done their due
 diligence; otherwise everybody would have been
 calling you out for silencing my ex-

 perience; cos you say that you're
 helping – but how does it help us?
 You're up here quoting my old
 bars and I'm still up in the ends no changes [...] (60–61)

Once this crucial question has been raised, the conflict is metaleptically resolved, at least within the fiction. Moved by Vyper's protest, Debris decides to abdicate the stage for the benefit of her silenced companion: "Could we maybe start this again...the right way?" she asks (63). Vyper takes over, finally writer and protagonist of his own story: an 'authentic' narration of the birth of grime, told by its legitimate teller, or an avatar thereof. Indeed, while Debris is *actually* Debris, Vyper is played by grime musician Jammz. Having metaleptically established the gesture's ethical import, but also, paradoxically, its insufficiency, the poetic laurels are performatively handed over. Debris's 'real' autofiction ends on an imagined version of what Vyper's autofiction could look like, were he allowed to tell his own story.

In reality, however, he is not. The character of SS Vyper is based on a childhood friend of Debris's with whom, as was discovered during rehearsals, Jammz was also acquainted. In an interview published on the Royal Court's website, Jammz describes the experience of talking to the 'real' Vyper when he came to see the show: "the way he felt about the piece and how accurately he felt that we had described what he was going through at the time felt so validating to me as a writer and as an actor" (Royal Court). No mention is made of the 'real' Vyper's response to the accusations voiced by his avatar and their lingering indictment of the 'solution' offered on stage. Indeed, Vyper's repeated question haunts the play's ending: "this is my story—where's my / P?" (62), he demands before being offered the mike, linking existential copyright to due remuneration. To this, the play and its paratext offer no extra-fictional solution, and the blunt-

ness of the evoked transaction echoes uncomfortably through the Royal Court auditorium: ‘his story’, as an ‘authentic’ source of entertainment, in exchange for the cash he has been systematically deprived of by social injustice, and that comes to represent a form of retribution, inclusion, and rebalancing, which cannot but fall short.

Autofiction, here, becomes a way to tell another’s story; to integrate it into one’s own, hoping that the authentic portrayal of self will compensate for the act of appropriation; and to signal the insufficiency of this compensation all at once. Within this dynamic, it is race, ultimately, that has the last word. Comparing Stevenson’s musical to *Misty*—Kene’s hybrid work of gig theatre, live art, and spoken word—is, in this sense, illuminating. While both plays reflect meta-theatrically on the ethical and political pitfalls of telling another’s story, the solution reached gives rise to radically different affects. In *Misty*, Kene stages his conflicted feelings about the risk of offering a prevalently white audience what he refers to as “‘urban youth’ [...] Jungle Shit” (69), by telling the story of a black man who has fallen victim to structural oppression and thus reproducing stereotypes around black crime. After much metanarrative reflection on the implications of doing so, which overlaps significantly with Debris’s dramatised dilemmas, Kene’s character lets go in a euphoric moment of liberation: “*He’s free*”, read the stage directions, “*Free from it all*” (68). While Kene concludes that whoever does not like his “Featre Shit” can “suck [his] big black theatre dick” (71), Stevenson remains, as we have seen, apologetic. This affective and ethical divide can be mapped along racialised lines: if Kene and his imagined other are both black, Stevenson’s racial privilege erects a problematic barrier between the narrator and the narrated. This is something Hickson’s work does not (have to) negotiate, and its reflections on compromise, ethical dilemmas, and political representational pitfalls are focused entirely on self-narration.

“Don’t Pretend This Is about Anything Grander than Getting Your Fucking Play on”: Ella Hickson’s *The Writer*

On the autofictionality spectrum, Hickson’s play is closer to the pole of fiction than of autobiography. The choice to read it as a piece of autofiction thus requires some justification. *The Writer* tells the story of a writer’s struggles to author a play without betraying herself and her (gendered) instincts and desires—a struggle Hickson is vocal about paratextually on a number of fora (see, e.g., Almeida Theatre). It interrogates the possibility of remaining faithful to authentic

creative acts within the dynamics of power and privilege regulating a ruthless cultural industry under patriarchal capitalism. Its protagonist is not the playwright's namesake; rather, she remains an anonymous and polyvalent or generic figure. The play moves rapidly from an opening scene of intellectual sparring between a "young woman" and "older man", set in a theatre after the night's performance (11); to a scratch-night-type, post-show discussion featuring the writer and director of the first scene, which is revealed as the writer's work in progress; to a series of conversations between the writer and a male partner, then the director, and finally a female partner. In between, an interlude showcases an experiment in unbridled *écriture féminine*, evoking a world made by and for women. As the scenes follow and undercut one another, the play's protagonist morphs from insecure artist to symbol of phallogocentrism⁷ in a lesbian relationship, via a dispiriting heterosexual partnership. Despite the character's refraction through multiplying personae, at its core this is a play *by* and *about* a woman in the theatre industry, with a desire to write authentically, artistically, and politically. Both playwright and protagonist are women who *do* "get to speak"—Hickson was, as she recounts in a pre-show discussion (a recording of which is available on the theatre's website), given the rare "gift" of an open commission by artistic director Rupert Goolde (Almeida Theatre 32:17). Both find themselves reflecting, in their work, on the chance they have been offered by a male gatekeeper: on its inevitable hypocrisies, the socio-historical forces it exists within, its impossibly high stakes, and what success or failure might look like.

The Writer thus fits Dix's definition of autofiction as "autobiographical fiction written in the subjunctive mood. That is to say, it is less concerned with faithfully reporting what its protagonist did" than "with the speculative question of how that subject might respond to new and often imagined environments" (6)—a selection of which are thrown at the titular writer in the play's sequence of self-undermining scenes. It also fulfils Nicol's re-definition of the autofictional pact as one in which "the author commits to a sincere exploration, through fiction, of a personal, i.e. autobiographical, truth" (257). This clearly holds true for

7 In the final scene, the protagonist's aggressive penetration of her (female) partner with a dildo follows a series of remarks emphasising her social and intellectual capital and belittling her partner's profession. This act of domination bespeaks the protagonist's interiorisation of patriarchal power structures: her concomitant wielding of phallus (in the form of a dildo) and logos (in the form of the linguistic power she holds as an Author) offers a paradigmatic illustration of the Derridean concept, which describes the privileging of masculine experience in shaping and understanding the world. It is rendered all the more resonant by its position following the attempt to break free from phallogocentric strictures in the play's '*écriture féminine*' interlude (57–65), and the writer's explicit critique of the phallogocentrism of the dramatic canon (67).

The Writer, as its paratext reveals. In the pre-show discussion, Hickson explains that the play

has turned out to be very political, but it was written very personally. It's hugely personal in a lot of ways as well, not necessarily biographical but personal, so the politics has been slightly by mistake. Or indeed I just think it's a case of: if you are truly honest about what goes on inside your body and mind, if you are not the central powerholder in society, then it will inevitably be political and revolutionary because you will be voicing things that demand change. (Almeida Theatre 36:31)

Hickson's play can thus be understood as a complex theatrical puzzle constructed around a "hugely personal" question. That question—namely, whether it is possible to make 'authentic' art without betraying oneself within a cultural market governed by patriarchal capitalism—differs, I suggest, from other questions informing works of theatre, in its being explicitly and necessarily rooted in the relative position of power of a subject that assumes and displays (rather than hiding and/or universalising) its specific markers of identity, which coincide with those of the playwright herself, and which are thus structurally bound up with her "authentic voice". Rather than rarefied into fictional universality, the author's own experience of attempting to write authentically from within the industry is distilled and refracted through narrative prisms or thought experiments that remind us, constantly, that what we are witnessing is far from universal and, indeed, that universality itself has always been a violent fiction. To read the play merely as a work of staged fiction would thus mean at once to lose sight of its timeliness and to smooth out its contradictions. Without acknowledging this autofictional impulse, the sorority between *The Writer* and plays such as *Poet in da Corner*, *salt.*, *A History of Water in the Middle East*, and *Superhoe* becomes illegible, and each play is reduced to the issues it addresses. Instead, at the heart of what they share is a writer writing her position, its problems, and her attempts to work with and in spite of them into the material itself.

The Writer resonates with Stevenson's musical on a number of levels. First, a similar pre-empting of potential ethical and political pitfalls, which are then incorporated into the dramatic material, underpins both plays. Second, it is the drama's own narrative grammar that is again under scrutiny, as well as its place in the cultural market: to what extent the latter compromises the former is *The Writer*'s focus. Third, the 'authenticity' evoked by the lived experience at the heart of the text, coupled with the noise of narrative metalepsis, work together to both inhibit the immersive engagement invited by realist fictional drama—framed within the play's plot as the feel-good, lifeless fodder of commercial success—and to allow a post-ironic form of sincerity to be affirmed and left to linger, despite its signalled insufficiency. Just as Debris exposing her own 'au-

thentic' self to then evoke and make fictional space for *Vyper* is at once a satisfying way to redress imbalances in social justice within the representational economy of the play, *and* falls victim to its own critique of the act of capitalising on the stories of silenced others, so Hickson's play is at once an indictment of any attempt to be political in contemporary theatre, *and* an attempt—through the 'authentic' and gendered voice of a female playwright writing autofictionally—to be precisely that. With its partially generalising implications, the common noun of the play's title casts the text in a paradoxically autofictional light, setting notions of individual creative authorship against the relentless struggle to not lose oneself—one's proper name—in an industry that squeezes identities into moulds, and experiences into sellable shapes and sizes.

Forming a puzzle of scenes that undermine one another in sequence, it is once again staged narrative metalepsis that pulls the rug out from under each of them, foregrounding the power dynamics and potential violence latent in sleek dramatic storytelling, of which the play recognises—to the point of indulging in—the appeal. The first of these disruptions comes at the end of Part One, in which the aforementioned young woman and older man argue about a play following the evening's performance. This is rapidly exposed as a play within the play, presented and commented on in Part Two by its writer, director, and actors in a post-show discussion.⁸

At a first glance, this opening scene seems to contain (and thus exemplify) the kind of political pungency its young female protagonist decries as lacking on contemporary stages. Addressing a scathing critique of the play she has just seen to the man who is revealed as its director, she accuses it of lacking life and urgency, like everything she has seen in theatres for some time. She had been hoping for something to "defibrillate her soul" (16). "[Y]ou come [to the theatre] thinking you're going to watch something that makes you feel something for the first time in...", she laments, but instead you are confronted with stale artifice: "I watched an entire audience get on their feet tonight for a show that had a dog in it", she protests. "Real-life babies. Like that's the only pulse we can find" (15). This is perhaps a stab at Jez Butterworth's massively successful West End transfer and fellow Royal Court production *The Ferryman* (Royal Court Theatre, 2017; Gielgud Theatre, 2017), which sported a real-life goose and baby, as well as Simon Stephens's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (National Theatre, 2012; Apollo Theatre, 2013), another West End box-office hit by one of

⁸ Though on its own terms this could be considered a simple case of *mise-en-abyme*, its juxtaposition with a series of other, subsequent disruptions that blur the boundaries of the fictional world(s) means it too can be read as part of the play's metaleptic structure.

Britain's leading playwrights, from whose commercial success as immersive, enjoyable stories both *The Writer* and its writer might wish to distinguish themselves. Unlike these other plays, Hickson's writing seems to signal, *here* is a story in which, rooted in the playwright's lived experience, something real is being offered up. "I've got to the point where I hate theatre, like everything I go and see is awful", Hickson admits in the pre-show discussion, echoing her character's character (31:08). And a little earlier: "I was angry, let's be clear, really angry. Yeah—I've been in the industry for ten years and a lot of how I started was... I mean, you've seen the play" (Almeida Theatre 3:12).

As Part One gives way to the rest of the play, we are shown the power dynamics informing the 'work in progress' and shaping the female playwright's right to speak, her work's easy co-options, and the choices she is coerced into making, through a series of dialogues, including with the play's director. Part One's display of real intensity is thus revealed as packaged for commercial exploitation: a more sophisticated version, in other words, of the live goose and baby derided at the outset. The young woman's real anger—alongside the playwright's own, as the paratextual framing suggests—has been travestied by inclusion in the cultural industries under neoliberal capitalism, which, like the mythical King Midas, reduces everything to its weight in gold. Forced by the director into the mould of "good-old fashioned commercial naturalism" (70)—indeed, the first part is, as the writer then admits, "intellectual back-and-forth"; it is "dialectic" and "wordy"; "it's Stoppard, it's Pinter, it's power struggle, it's patriarchy", and "it's elitist" (67)—the staged anger is no longer real but "zeitgeisty", as the power-holding director describes it, and valued only inasmuch as it succeeds in getting "bums on seats" (21). No one in the process is innocent: "it suits you now while the moment is hot, because you are well aware of the commercial value of your opposition. [...] So—don't pretend this is about anything grander than getting your fucking play on" (70), Hickson shouts at an avatar of herself in the voice of a fictional, male director.⁹ A similar accusation is levelled by Debris at her staged self: is it her desire to be included that fuels her storytelling act, predicated on the taming of countercultural traditions for the benefit of Royal Court ticket buyers? Can those who "get to speak", within the limits of what is socially accepted of them, genuinely do so *for* those who do not? And what motivates attempts to position oneself disruptively within hegemonic discourses and query their narrative syntax? Is it the pursuit of "Holy Fire"—a

⁹ In an online Q&A at the Contemporary Drama in English conference in June 2021, as well as in the present volume, Hickson explains with reference to this example how all the voices and opinions expressed in *The Writer* are, to some degree, her own.

term used to describe the “essence” of theatre by both the young woman in Part One of *The Writer* (73) and by Hickson herself in the pre-show discussion (31:34)? Or are disruption and positioning merely the latest buzzword qualifying “zeitgeisty” writing? These are the questions signalled, raised, and left hanging by these autofictional works and their paratexts, in a somewhat apologetic tone.

Conclusion

This play is a clear, clear voice, I think it's a really clear shout of rage and I think it's a clear want, but it is a little solipsistic. [...] I don't know how political in a real sense hyper-individualisation is. Like, yes, it's a woman standing on a stage going 'this is me, this is what I want and I will not apologise for any of it', which is great it's a really strong statement and more women need to that, but I don't know where that goes next [...] That feels a little bit individualistic and a little bit solipsistic and I think there needs to be something structurally that moves forward. (Almeida Theatre 42:50)

As exemplified by this extract, which would fit seamlessly into *The Writer*, Hickson's paratextual commentary foregrounds the apologetic malaise that I have identified in both plays discussed in this chapter. And indeed, after watching them, this spectator was left with the feeling of having witnessed some sort of apology—one, perhaps, predicated on the playwrights' awareness of their relative privilege, alongside their experiences of marginalisation. If, however, the lack of apology Hickson points to in the text applies equally to its extra-fictional author, perhaps what felt *like* an apology were the attempts to both signal *and* ignore the hypocrisies of the idea of theatre that is constantly upheld and undermined throughout both plays. One senses an author feeling trapped, curtailed, and compromised, while waiting for “something structurally” to move forward. One senses her courting, perhaps, the seductive idea of being part of that forward movement, as well as the lingering doubt that, until a shift has happened in the industry and in society's power dynamics more broadly, this remains a mere flattering or even narcissistic illusion, and any questioning of narrative grammar unmoored from real-world struggles.

Drawing on Wolfgang Funk, Daniel Schulze writes that “in periods of drastic change where the relationship between experience and representation is renegotiated, authenticity and its adjacent discourses (sincerity, veracity, etc.) tend to reclaim the spotlight” (14). And indeed, though not unambiguously true, self-

narration is considered nothing if not ‘authentic’.¹⁰ It is against the backdrop of this collective renegotiation of “the relationship between experience and representation” traversing British cultural and political discourse in the 2000s, and increasingly in recent years, that this chapter has situated its study of staged autofiction by women. It has suggested that playwrights who aim to position themselves critically within a system in the process of being re-evaluated often opt for autofiction and its ‘authenticity effect’¹¹ as a way of steering clear of the pitfalls of a narrative grammar that has exhausted its potential but has not yet been replaced by an imagined or desired alternative.

Stevenson is aware of the political insufficiency of a storytelling act that speaks for her silenced companion and predates his language and culture, selling his ‘authentic’ story *as part of her own* to a largely white, middle-class audience. Indeed, she advertises this awareness to pre-empt and ward off accusations of naivety or exploitation. At the same time, by going ahead with it, she is compelled to buy into the political pungency of her gesture, to some degree at least. Hickson’s writing, too, congregates and disintegrates repeatedly around an impossible desire, which it seems at once to affirm, undercut, and ridicule: to create and be recognised by the industry for that “Holy Fire” her protagonist evokes, without betraying *it* and herself alike. Signalling the impossibility of this desire through the half-smile with which it is conjured, the self-perpetuating loop of the text’s metaleptic subversions is shored up with autofictional sincerity. This paradoxical combination comes across, at times, as a solipsistic desire to “save face”, as pre-empted and pointed out—of course—by Hickson herself.¹² In this sense, much recent autofictional playwriting by women chimes with the post-ironic pursuit of what Siân Adiseshiah terms the “new (critical) sincerity”, in analogy with the “dialectics of sincerity” traced by Adam Kelly in works of contemporary American fiction. Discussing David Foster Wallace’s prose, Kelly remarks on how the “potential triteness” of authorial statements—like Hickson’s protagonist’s desire for theatre to make the world “change shape” (19), then “[d]ismantle capitalism and overturn the patriarchy” (23)—is “simultaneously embraced and held at a distance”, through “an unillusioned acknowledgement of formula, alongside a barely repressed hope or belief that such formula need not entirely negate the expression of something genuine and real” (Kelly 7). In this dynamic, as I have argued, the authenticity of authorial posi-

10 On staged authenticity and its affordances in autofictional narratives, see Goodling and Mark.

11 See previous footnote.

12 During the conference Q&A referenced above (see footnote 9), Hickson wondered about the influence on this text of her desire “to save face”.

tioning allowed by autofictional practice is key. Where ironic play has run out of steam, made-up stories are suspect, and political discourse feels empty, the storytelling subject with ethical and political ambitions can, at times, do nothing more than position itself and speak, contritely, of what it knows, deploying autofictional devices to transcend disillusionment in the quest for something able to 'defibrillate souls'.

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III Experimenting with Forms

Hannah Greenstreet

“I Want the World to Change Shape”: Form and Politics in Ella Hickson’s *The Writer* (2018)

Abstract: Ella Hickson has said that theatrical form “is the point at which all subversion operates” (Personal interview). This chapter argues for the importance of form to Hickson’s political project as a playwright and the importance of feminist, anti-capitalist politics to her playwriting, focusing on her 2018 play, *The Writer*. In the first scene of the play, a young woman writer declares that she “want[s] the world to change shape” (Hickson, *The Writer* 19), setting up an implicit analogy between social structures and theatrical form. This resonates with a recent turn in English Literature and Theatre Studies to a more social understanding of aesthetic form by critics such as Sarah Grochala, who has theorised a “politics of form” that operates distinct from content (17). However, while *The Writer* produces its politics through a dynamic relationship between form and content, it also questions whether form and, by extension, theatre can be political in isolation. Through close reading and performance analysis of *The Writer*’s first production, informed by original interviews with Ella Hickson and Blanche McIntyre, this chapter maps the constantly shifting terrain of *The Writer*’s unstable form and its potential meanings. I conclude that *The Writer*’s greatest challenge to established theatrical forms and social norms resides not in its critique of any one form but in its juxtaposition of different forms, which activate doubt both about the political position of the play and the capacity of theatre to change the world.

Introduction

In the first scene of *The Writer* (Almeida Theatre, London, 2018) by Ella Hickson, a young female writer confidently declares to an older male director, “I want the world to change shape” (Hickson, *The Writer* 19). Wanting “the world to change shape” is a powerful metaphor for socio-political change, the word “shape” setting up an implicit parallel with theatrical form. In order for the world to change shape, it suggests, new theatrical forms through which to imagine the world must be created. Or even, through creating new forms, we can reimagine the world. However, the director counters the young writer’s ambitious declaration with the words “I’m not sure theatre can” (19). As well as representing the the-

atrical establishment against which the young woman is railing, he voices genuine doubt about whether theatre is an effective tool by which to accomplish social change, a doubt that reverberates throughout the play.

In her playwriting, Ella Hickson takes up the challenge to reimagine the world through experimental theatrical forms. In an interview I conducted with her a year after the first production of *The Writer*, Hickson declared, “I feel increasingly clear about my management of idea and form, like how idea has to speak to form [...] The interrogation has to be formal, it just has to be, because that is the point at which all subversion operates” (Hickson, Personal interview). Hickson’s recent plays can, indeed, be characterised by their formal experimentation, from the epic, century-spanning, eco-drama *Oil* (Almeida, London, 2016), to the East German thriller *ANNA* (National Theatre, London, 2019), which experimented with binaural sound, to the unconventional history play, *Swive [Elizabeth]* (Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, London, 2019). Perhaps the most formally daring of her plays so far is *The Writer*, which, through a kaleidoscope of shifting scenes and styles, explores the pressures put on a female writer working within a patriarchal, capitalist system.

This chapter argues for the importance of form to Ella Hickson’s political project as a playwright and the importance of feminist, anti-capitalist politics to the aesthetics of Hickson’s playwriting. Through a close analysis of *The Writer* and drawing on original interviews with Ella Hickson and Blanche McIntyre, I argue that Hickson’s play dramatises a search for a form that will allow its titular character to express what she needs to say. As I shall show, in each of its scenes, the play tests out different forms – from the dialectic of scenes 1 and 4, to a version of naturalism in scenes 2 and 5, to an experiment in *écriture féminine* in scene 3 – and finds each wanting in different ways. I conclude that *The Writer*’s radical politics emerge from and are catalysed by its juxtaposition of different forms, which activate doubt and ambivalence about the capacity of theatre to impact the world, complex political affects that endure beyond the play.¹

¹ Since this chapter was drafted, two further critical works have been published on *The Writer*. Vicky Angelaki insightfully considers *The Writer* through the prisms of gendered crisis and (lack of) care (Angelaki). Alireza Fakhrkonandeh links *The Writer*’s “queer feminist” aesthetic disruption of “realistic/ naturalistic structure” with the Deleuzian psychological process of “becoming-other” (Fakhrkonandeh 7). However, the emphasis of his discussion of form is on *The Writer* as a literary text rather than its dynamic theatrical potential in production.

The Politics of Form

In the last decade, there has been a resurgence of critical interest in formalist approaches to literature and, more recently, theatre. This, in turn, can help us to define what we mean by theatrical form, which has been surprisingly under-theorised in relation to modern and contemporary British theatre. Michael Shane Boyle, Matt Cornish and Branden Woolf argue that there is a "longstanding suspicion around – even allergy to – form within our field [theatre studies]" (Boyle, Cornish and Woolf 7), with many assuming "that scholars or artists chiefly interested in form inevitably tend toward resigned apoliticism or elitist escapism" (8), a critical lacuna that they go on to address in relation to postdramatic theatre. Sarah Grochala also addresses the relationship between form and politics in her work on the contemporary political play. She observes that in British theatre "the political play continues to be commonly thought of as a play that yokes together the dialectical discussion of a political issue with a realist dramaturgy in a way that is considered to produce political efficacy" (Grochala 13). However, she argues that "serious drama", which she associates with playwrights such as Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw, cannot adequately represent experiences under late-stage capitalism. Inspired by Zygmunt Bauman's concept of "liquid modernity", Grochala proposes "liquid dramaturgy": experimental dramatic forms that operate through simultaneous understandings of time, plot structures that resist linear causation and challenges to traditional conventions of character (Grochala 17).² Examples of plays that deploy "liquid dramaturgy" include Nick Payne's *Constellations* (Royal Court, London, 2012), Simon Stephens' *Pornography* (Deutsches Schauspielhaus, Hamburg, 2008) and Caryl Churchill's *Love and Information* (Royal Court, London, 2012). Such plays "offer an alternative model of political theatre to serious drama, one that operates predominantly through a politics of form as opposed to a politics of content" (Grochala 17).

While Grochala's work offers a productive call to rethink the kinds of plays that are considered political and how, I find Grochala's idea of a "politics of form" both intellectually attractive and potentially problematic. For Grochala, the progressive politics of a play reside far less in its content and more in how the form and structure of the play allow its audience to recognise and reimagine

² Bauman seems partly to be describing the affective experience of late modernity, characterised by "fragility, temporariness, vulnerability and inclination to constant change" (ix). He links this with economic deregulation and the increasing emphasis on people as individuals rather than citizens, leading to a lack of political agency (Bauman 31).

the social structures in which they are imbricated. She argues, “in order to create political change, the social subject needs to be able to imagine how their social reality could be structured differently. A play that articulates a politics of form, reimagining the structure of social reality through its structures, allows the social subject to access a vision of a world structured on fundamentally different principles” (Grochala 22). This idea is attractive because it suggests how theatre might change the world, resonating with the Writer’s ambition for the “world to change shape”. However, I am not convinced that the relationship between social structures and dramaturgical structures – the analogy between “liquid modernity” and “liquid dramaturgy” upon which Grochala’s argument depends – is quite so straightforward. Is glimpsing “a vision of a world structured on fundamentally different principles” enough to generate change in the world beyond the theatre? As shall be seen, this is a question that *The Writer* wrestles with, especially in the gap between its utopian scene 3 and the crushing compromise of scene 5. Furthermore, Grochala’s argument that plays that operate through a “politics of form” “frequently lack any engagement with explicitly political issues in their content” (15) risks de-emphasising the importance of content in determining a play’s politics, although her analyses of her case studies themselves do consider context, production choices and content as well as form. Therefore, while Grochala’s concept of “liquid dramaturgy” is a useful term for describing some of the formal features of *The Writer*, which I will deploy, I do not agree with all the implications of her argument. Indeed, it could be argued that *The Writer* both enacts a “politics of form” and suggests the limitations of the idea of aesthetic form – and, more broadly, theatre – as political in isolation.

When analysing a play, it is difficult to prise form apart from content.³ This seems particularly true of *The Writer*, which repeatedly puts the structures of the theatre industry and its own form up for discussion and, through its compulsive formal experimentation, suggests the “affordances” (Levine 6) and constrictions of different theatrical forms.⁴ When I interviewed her, director Blanche McIntyre observed that *The Writer* is “self-aware of its constant reshaping of itself, so it allows you to think about form in the abstract, where a lot of plays disguise their form” (McIntyre). Therefore, *The Writer* is a particularly apt case study

³ Dan Rebellato explores this idea at length in a forthcoming chapter (“Form and (Dis)content”).

⁴ I am borrowing the word “affordances” – and the idea that certain forms allow you to express certain things – from Caroline Levine, who, like Grochala, also theorises the politics of form through an analogy between social forms and aesthetic forms. She defines form even more expansively to mean “all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference” (Levine 3).

through which to explore some of these tangled questions about form and politics. As will emerge from my analysis, I am defining form capaciously: theatrical form encompasses not only the shape of a play, how individual scenes are structured and how they relate to each other; the aesthetic conventions with which the play is in dialogue; but also, how the play shapes its content and its content shapes the form; and the production choices and processes that allow the play to take shape on stage.

Searching for Form: *The Writer's* First Production

The Writer was first staged at the Almeida Theatre in London in April 2018, in a production directed by Blanche McIntyre. Following the Almeida's production of *Oil* in 2016, Ella Hickson was awarded an open commission by the theatre and wrote the first draft of the play in five weeks in the summer of 2017, while on writing retreat at the MacDowell colony (Bain, Hickson, McIntyre). Hickson says that she found the process of creating *The Writer* freeing, in rejecting her urge to seek approval and the inherited theatrical forms that she had been taught, instead searching for a form that reflected “what goes on inside my own body and mind” (Hickson, Personal interview). Hickson was supported in this by director Blanche McIntyre, who encouraged the creative team “to follow their instinct and then hone their [...] impulses around instinct” (McIntyre), in stark contrast to the combative relationship between the fictional Writer and Director in Hickson's play. Unusually both for a piece of new writing and for Hickson's usual playwriting process (*Oil* went through over sixty different drafts before it came to be staged), the script was not changed very much in rehearsals. Hickson notes that “you often change things to make it a better made play and [...] the point of it was never to be a well-made play, so you weren't trying to dramaturgically solve it in a sense, which is both its success and its failure”; instead she considers it an “experiment in expression” (Hickson, Personal interview). Blanche McIntyre recalls that it was a far more “political” rehearsal process than her standard rehearsal processes, “spend[ing] more time talking about abstract concepts, how they work in real life systems [...] than I did working on the actual scenes” (McIntyre). This was partly because the experimental form of *The Writer* made it less receptive to a focus on character and, even more “because this is a play, more than any play I've done, every word, every moment, every gesture [...] can be read in a political way”, meaning that every choice “had to be scrutinised, not just from the point of view of whether it worked theatrically but also [what] the specific thing of that raised hand, look, scene change, gesture, word was trying to do” (McIntyre). In the 2018 production, the part of the Writer was played

by Romola Garai, the Director was played by Michael Gould, and Samuel West and Lara Rossi played the parts of Boyfriend and Girlfriend respectively, as well as the director and the writer in the opening play-within-a-play.

“A Formal Expression of a Political Statement”?

The Writer opens with an encounter between a young woman and a director on the stage of a theatre after a show. The young woman critiques the production she has just seen. The director finds her rage “zeitgeisty” and offers her the opportunity to write for this stage (Hickson, *The Writer* 21). She reveals that he had made her the same offer when she was 19 but he had sexually harassed her, and she had felt compromised. Then, with a deconstructive turn that comes to be characteristic of *The Writer*’s form, the scene is revealed to be a play-within-a-play and the characters actors; the ‘real’ Writer and the ‘real’ Director participate in a ‘post-show’ discussion with the actors and audience plants, critiquing the previous scene.⁵ In Scene 2, the Writer and her boyfriend argue over whether she should accept a large advance to turn her play into a film. Scene 3 is a stream of consciousness monologue spoken by the Writer, expressing a fantasy of escape, connection with nature, and a romantically fulfilling sexual relationship between women. The fantasy world is punctured by the Director’s critique of it in Scene 4 as not “real” and not “good drama” (67). In Scene 5, the Writer and her girlfriend have dinner together in a luxury flat. They have sex and the Writer hurts the girlfriend, re-enacting boyfriend’s lack of care for the Writer in the second scene. However, even this summary of the play might suggest a kind of linear progression – one that is repeatedly unsettled by the shifts in form and levels of reality within the play. As Dominic Cavendish notes in his review, *The Writer*, “proceeds as an ingenious series of ambushes that invite a set of conflicted responses” (Cavendish).

The formal instability of *The Writer* also produces an instability in terms of meaning, which some reviewers and audience members found intensely uncomfortable. In her review for *The Spectator*, Helen Lewis observed, “*The Writer* is an endlessly tricky piece, trying to have its meaning-cake and eat it, showing you scenes and then immediately undercutting them with meta-narrative” (Lewis). This in turn has implications for the play’s politics; direct political statements

⁵ For clarity, I am capitalising Writer and Director when they refer to the characters in Hickson’s play. For the characters in the play-within-a-play in the first scene, I use ‘young woman’ and ‘director’.

are made, then countered, or ironised, making it challenging to ascertain what the play is 'saying'. While in the first scene of *The Writer*, the young woman declares that a play should be "a formal expression of a political statement" (27), the experience of watching the play as a whole proves that this is not so straightforward.

The opening scene of *The Writer* is perhaps the most easily legible, politically and formally, due to its deployment of the conventional form of the dialectic. The scene centres around a debate about the purpose of theatre: is it to entertain and to get "bums on seats" (20) by selling tickets, as the director says; or is theatre something "sacred [...] communal and civic" (26), charged with trying to change the world, as the young woman believes? The commercial imperative and all the power imbalances that are shown to come with it are juxtaposed with the young woman's utopian desire for a theatre that both transcends and transforms the material world – a desire that the director suggests is naïve and impractical in his laughter at her grand ambition to "Dismantle capitalism and overturn the patriarchy" (23).

The young woman criticises not only the director's play and his conduct but the whole system of representation of which it is a part. She denaturalises stage conventions by drawing attention to their artificiality: "Two people walking on stage pretending to be two other people and saying – 'Hi', 'hi'" (13). Ironically the first sentence could also describe the opening of Hickson's own play; the metatheatrical acknowledgement prepares the audience for a departure from those conventions of dramatic writing. The play that the young woman describes having watched seems an absurd amalgam of different theatrical modes and casual sexism, with "a miraculous army of – builders, soldiers, scientists, fucking women in completely unnecessary hotpants" (13), "real-life babies" (15), a dog. The young woman suggests that the artificiality of the realist theatrical convention of representing "a perfectly charming front room with people being funny" is irresponsible in its distance from "real life" (13) and pressing social and political issues. She suggests that the theatre has an ethical responsibility to represent "real life" when "the world is imploding" (14).

The young woman's critique of the theatre industry strongly recalls the feminist critique of realism, developed by critics including Elin Diamond, Jill Dolan and Elaine Aston, a perspective that has been hugely influential on political approaches to theatrical form. In the introduction to *Unmaking Mimesis*, Diamond declares,

With Brechtian hindsight we know that realism, more than any other form of theater representation, mystifies the process of theatrical signification. Because it naturalizes the relation between character and actor, setting and world, realism operates in concert with

ideology. And because it depends on, insists on a stability of reference, an objective world that is the source and guarantor of knowledge, realism surreptitiously reinforces (even if it argues with) the arrangements of that world. (Diamond 4–5)

Realism, according to this critique, is a conservative form, shoring up the patriarchal status quo rather than facilitating challenge and change – even if its content expresses radical political views. Diamond suggests that by representing the world as it is (in its patriarchal and capitalist organisation), realism precludes the possibility of change, not giving space to imagine an alternative. Hickson seems to take a similar view of the theatrical form she adopts for the first scene of *The Writer*. In an article published in the *Guardian* a month before *The Writer* opened, Hickson wrote, “No matter how subversive the conversation, if the form is naturalistic, the argument dialectical and the protagonists – as the genre tends to have them – white, male and middle-aged, then the play is part of the establishment” (Hare et al.). By this logic, the young woman’s critique of the theatrical establishment in the first scene of *The Writer* is compromised by the form in which it is expressed and must be de-familiarised through metatheatres. Nonetheless, the search for an alternative form to express female experience that culminates in scene 3 seems to be galvanised by the deployment and critique of dominant theatrical conventions in the first scene. Moreover, the return to a more conventional form for the fourth and fifth scenes of *The Writer* suggests that Hickson does not completely disavow what Grochala would call “serious drama”. The naturalistic, dialectical form is both a necessary stage on the journey to a more experimental form and, crucially, is in dialogue with it. The interaction of different forms – belonging to both “liquid” and “serious” drama – within *The Writer* suggests a nuanced and dynamic relationship between form and politics.

“An Attempt at Staging Female Experience”

In contrast with the intellectual argument of the first scene, the central monologue of *The Writer* makes its feminist politics felt affectively, using an innovative form to imagine an alternative world. The stage directions at the start of scene 3 pose the “provocation” to a director of “staging female experience [...] avoiding the inherently patriarchal nature of theatre” (57). The script instructs,

Female characters should do – they are not having things done to them. Bodies are for action, not titillation or decoration. There should be no looking. The protagonist should own the space. (57)

Hickson's manifesto for staging female experience resonates with theories of *écriture féminine*. In "Aller à la Mer", Hélène Cixous criticises the theatre for the violence against women at the centre of its plots, epitomised by Greek and Shakespearean tragedy. She proposes an alternative theatre, drawing on the dual metaphor of stage production and birth as "a body in labour", describing its features thus:

If the stage is woman, it will mean ridding this space of theatricality. [...] This will be a stage/ scene without event. No need for plot or action; a single gesture is enough, but one that can transform the world. (Cixous 547)

As well as the shared thematic emphasis on the female body, several ideas resonate with Hickson's dramatic methods in this scene, particularly the turning away from "event" and the minimising of the impression of theatricality. Scene 3 is a notable departure in style from the rest of the play in its adoption of diegesis; it reads more like prose than drama and registers the influence of Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein and Jeanette Winterson (Hickson, Personal interview).

Hickson's monologue swoops from the everyday to the epic, with dislocating jumps in time and place through the vivid present and the insistent first-person pronouns. It starts with the Writer speaking confessionally about having an IUD contraceptive device fitted, then shifts into a feminist rewriting of the myth of Semele, reclaiming her as the mythic mother of female playwrights. Rapidly condensing time and space, the next section of the monologue simultaneously describes a swim across a freezing lake and makes the swim a metaphor for an internal transformation, growing into strength as a writer. On the other side of the lake, in the woods she finds her "tribe" (61). The final section of the monologue recounts a mutually fulfilling sexual relationship with another woman and the destruction of the idyll by the intrusion of the male gaze.

In its textual density, the scene demands far more concentration to process than the previous scenes. Some audience members found its difficulty rebarbative rather than rewarding. In his review, Paul Taylor remarks, "A real pity, then, that the mythic monologue in which she [the Writer] gives unfettered expression to the intuitive form she hankers for is so embarrassingly over-written" (Taylor), a criticism that is anticipated in the play by the Director's critique of scene 3 in the following scene. Indeed, in rehearsals, Hickson and McIntyre came under pressure to cut the scene, which they resisted (McIntyre). McIntyre recalls that she found scene 3 "intensely challenging to direct", due to its "combination of deep personal expression [...] and absence of plot mechanism for justifying or supporting that", which meant "you can't use any of your standard kit" that she would for directing a scene in a naturalist style (McIntyre). Scene 3 was a

stark departure in style from the rest of McIntyre's production, in the style of writing, the theatrical idiom and the visuals of its staging. Whereas Anna Fleischle's design for scene 2 was characterised by an overabundance of the material in bringing the Writer and Boyfriend's home to life onstage, in scene 3 the stage was bare. The minimalism of the set could suggest the Writer's temporary respite from the pressures of capitalism. The stage presence of Romola Garai, who started the scene alone on the bare stage (joined later by Lara Rossi, who echoed her movements but did not speak), carried the monologue, placing the focus on the Writer's internal transformation.

In McIntyre's production, the monologue was accented and underscored by atmospheric lighting design by Richard Howell and sound design by Emma Laxton. A large proportion of the monologue was delivered in darkness or semi-darkness, allowing greater focus on the auditory experience of the text, as well as making it more difficult for the audience to look at Garai and Rossi's bodies. Discontinuities and jumps in focus of the text were registered through a series of flashes of light and static bursts. For the most part, the sound and lighting was more focused on creating an atmosphere rather than mimetically representing what was described in the monologue. McIntyre allowed the text to generate many of the theatrical transformations in the audience's imaginations, rather than deploying extensive technical effects. The bodily transformations the monologue describes were physicalised at points by Sasha Milavic Davies's choreography, which also forged a sense of visual connection between Garai and Rossi. For example, as she described swimming across the lake, Garai moved in a slow motion, abstract rendition of swimming, bending down to touch the floor, then stretching up, movements that were echoed by Rossi behind her. The movement suggested that Rossi was both Garai's shadow and her double, anticipating the Writer's description of her sexual union with her "swimming mate" (63) as an encounter with sameness later in the monologue.

Hickson grapples with — and sets the director the challenge of grappling with — how women can have an embodied stage presence beyond the titillating paradigm of the male gaze. The monologue is rooted in embodied experiences, such as swimming, dancing and having sex, activities that recall Cixous's idea of the female "body in labour". The Writer describes her physical transformation, from a body that can be objectified to a practical body with "Longer limbs, broad-shouldered, with an impressive gait. Six feet or more" (60), a transformation that can be imagined more easily than it can be staged. McIntyre's direction of scene 3, which forewent mimetic reference for a disjunction between the textual and the physical body, left space for members of the audience to overlay the bodily transformations that the Writer describes onto the physical body of Garai through their imagination.

Hickson and McIntyre also avoided mimetic representation of the transformative sexual encounter in this scene. Mimesis had been diagnosed as a problem earlier in the play, when the young woman declares in the first scene, "It's looking that does it" (23), recalling feminist critiques of mimesis. Throughout scene 3, Romola Garai and Lara Rossi remained fully clothed and did not touch. Garai sat alone on the edge of the stage, with Rossi sitting further upstage, as she described the sexual encounter:

You've done it to yourself a thousand times and how delightful to negotiate your sameness on another and celebrate it from the outside. That is the only outside there is. No one is sexy. Everything is sex. There is no looking. There is only being. (63)

The description of the sexual encounter focuses on sameness rather than difference in the mutual masturbation. Their bodies seem to fuse together to become one entity, completely immersed in each other, with no "outside".

The sexual encounter is followed by a utopian revisioning of the world, as if these new forms have been generated by it. As Garai described how "We feel the possibility of new constructions – systems, schemes and structures – We are making a space conceived entirely by the architecture of our wanting" (64), she sat opposite Rossi, mirroring her position. Projections of white circles were sketched on the floor of the stage, responding to but not mimetically representing the images in Hickson's epic stage directions:

A chalk circle. A structure. A system. A scheme. For a new world: the whole earth changes its face. (64)

Garai and Rossi sat watching each other and talking. White projected circles were sketched on the dark back wall, until the entire back wall and stage were covered with scribbles.

The formal departure of scene 3 from the rest of the play makes space to envision new societal structures, echoing the connection the young woman drew between artistic and social structures in the first scene when she declared, "I want the world to change shape" (19). The line, "We are making a space conceived entirely by the architecture of our wanting" (64), brings together the imagery of form and desire that runs throughout the play. It conceives of form as something far broader and more social than the aesthetic, paralleling new forms of sex, new forms of relating to other people, new theatrical forms, new ways of organising society, new buildings. At the same time, as the swirling projections wrote themselves over Garai and Rossi's bodies, whose postures mirrored each other, the "architecture of our wanting" was rooted in the co-presence of the performers' bodies, the desire given a concrete shape through flesh. It is

not the audience projecting desire onto Rossi and Garai and thus objectifying them, but a charge between the two performers that is inward-facing and private but radiates outwards. This scene, in both its form and its content, resonates strongly with Grochala's idea of how a play can "reimagin[e] the structure of social reality through its structures, allow[ing] the social subject to access a vision of a world structured on fundamentally different principles" (22).

However, the utopia created and held between bodies in scene 3 is precious and fragile. It breaks down with the re-intrusion of the male gaze, with the arrival of a tourist "with binoculars held to his eyes", making the Writer again self-conscious of her body "in a flood of shame" (65). The feeling of disillusionment is as palpable as the transcendent moment of utopian desire. Hickson explained that she wanted to "put in[to the audience] both the ecstasy of freedom and the inevitability of reality, which is what that final act really does", when these new societal structures prove unsustainable (Hickson, Personal interview). There is something unrealisable about the utopian world sketched out in scene 3 (indeed, perhaps the definition of utopian is that it should be unrealisable). As Hickson notes, the projections of the new world are "not a blueprint or anything that we can actually live by" (Hickson, Personal interview). She suggests that the final scene of the play recognises, "if anything was going to be remade it has to be remade from within that system [of capitalism]. And I really take that reality onboard and I really try to engage with the inevitability of compromise" (Personal interview). Nonetheless, the glimpse of an alternative in scene 3 leaves a powerful affective residue, a sense of unease or wrongness, in which to root a critique of the status quo. As the Writer observes, "This strange cage is so much more visible for having spent some deific time without it. / Enough, perhaps to make you wish, you'd never tasted freedom" (65).

The phrase "strange cage" suggests not only the restrictions imposed by a return to capitalist society, but also the constrictions involved in a return to a more conventional theatrical form. Through the Director's dramaturgical critique of the central monologue, scene 4 reintroduces the 'rules' of dramatic composition, which had been temporarily suspended for the experiment of scene 3. He says that the scene is "not good theatre" (67) because it lacks conflict and a power struggle and says that it "needs an ending" (66). Interestingly, the Director considers the prospective audience's engagement with the form of the play in terms of desire, but it is desire framed as a financial transaction that is not fulfilled: "We've invested in the relationship between the writer and director. That's what you set up at the beginning and it doesn't pay off" (66). Whereas scene 3 attempted to stand outside or beyond capitalism temporarily and to consider the alternative forms that could be generated there, the Director reintroduces the commercial imperative of needing to sell tickets to the play, making audience

satisfaction a pressing concern. He even implies that the Writer is disingenuous in suggesting that she is not motivated by what sells, predicting that her "next play will be a male protagonist and good-old fashioned commercial naturalism" (70).

"This Strange Cage"

Although the final scene of Hickson's play does not deliver exactly what the Director has requested (the re-encounter between the Writer and Director has already been staged in scene 4), it does return to a more conventional form. In this domestic scene, the Writer and girlfriend have dinner together, have sex and discuss their relationship, echoing scene 2 between the Writer and her boyfriend. From the stage directions, Hickson indicates that "*we should, if possible, get the sense the DIRECTOR has directed the scene*", suggesting his presence should be visible in the "*commercialism*" of the "*high-end, smart, glitzy*" apartment and the makeup and costuming of the Writer and her girlfriend to "*look like hot, hipster, versions of their previous selves*" (75). Like the previous scenes, this scene occupies a dual status as a scene from the Writer's life with its own narrative logic (the glitzy apartment has been paid for by the Director's offer of more money and/ or by the Writer's play transferring to the West End) and a scene within the play the Writer is writing. The trappings of wealth raise the possibility that the Writer has allowed herself to be bought, compromising her artistic vision and her radical politics.

However, the idea that the Director was creatively in control of the scene was less obvious in Blanche McIntyre's production, suggesting the difficulty as a director of conveying a fictional directorial presence. McIntyre remembered that, beyond the set and costuming, the stage direction specifying the scene should look like it was directed by the fictional male Director was "mostly ignored", as "the play is not giving the audience what the director wants, that is a nice, neat, satisfying character and narrative arc. It's detonating all kinds of ideas, which are subversive and so to that extent, it's not possible to direct it in [...] the way that that male director would direct it, without squashing all of that subversion" (McIntyre). The phrase "detonating ideas" seems a particularly apt description of the ending of *The Writer*. As the climax of two other sexual encounters in the scene, the Writer penetrates her girlfriend with a dildo. However, while the other two sexual encounters were mutually pleasurable, when she wields the dildo, the Writer appears to forget her girlfriend's existence, caring only about her own pleasure. As she hurts her (Black, shorter, less financially secure) girlfriend, the Writer could be seen to be re-enacting the exploitative power dynamic

between the Director and the Writer, this time with her as the perpetrator. In an interview, Hickson suggested that the last scene, “makes the argument, via an elaborate double ended purple dildo, that power difference is the work of capitalism, it’s less to do with gender per se” (Frances-White and Wokoma). Yet, unlike the dialectic of scene 1, the final scene does not proceed through argument. The dildo is a symbol, conveying multiple, unruly meanings through abstraction.

Rather than discussing the bad sexual encounter directly, the girlfriend shifts the focus to abstract art, in a speech about Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937). She tells a story about Picasso continuing to paint the mural, oblivious, as two women he was sleeping with fight beneath him. In McIntyre’s production, a reproduction of Picasso’s *Guernica* was projected for a moment onto the stage and back wall and the Writer “stares – horrified, haunted” (88). This could suggest that the Writer, who earlier in the play compared herself with Picasso, has seen herself in the portrait of the uncaring artist and is horrified at what she has become. Yet, although the monologue appears structurally at a key moment of the play, in which it might be expected to explain what has gone before, the oblique shift to ekphrasis raises far more questions than it answers (see Fakhrkonandeh 26–29 for an analysis of some possible meanings of the reference to *Guernica*).

Furthermore, not knowing whether the Writer or the Director is in creative control of the final scene makes its interpretation – and by extension its politics – unstable. In her review, Victoria Sadler argued that “this section feels like a fully-fledged heteronormative take on queer lives and queer theatre and it just feels flawed” (Sadler). If the scene is supposed to have been directed by the male Director character, it is inextricable from the male gaze and plays as a fetishized depiction of a heterosexist stereotype of lesbian sex, with the phallus as the ultimate signifier and legitimator of the sexual act as ‘proper’ sex. However, if we conceive of this scene as creatively led by the Writer, the dildo might have queer potential to disrupt heteropatriarchal hierarchies or at least to ironise them. Lynda Hart argues that although there has been controversy around the use of dildos amongst lesbian feminists because of its association as a “penis-substitute”, strap-ons can be read as “depicting a phallus that has no reference to the ‘real’ of the penis” (123). Nonetheless, the queer potential of the dildo and, arguably, the play more broadly, was not realised in the first production. As the act of penetration occurs so near to the end of the play and is meant to shock, there is not enough time to process the dildo as anything other than sensational, as registered in some of the reviews (Purves; Marmion). When I saw McIntyre’s production of *The Writer*, the final scene played as a violent contradiction of the utopian vision of sex between women and the feminist theatrical form ex-

plored in the third scene, rather than resembling the play of meanings described by Hart.

Nonetheless, the final scene of *The Writer* cannot completely erase what has come before. While teleological pressure is put on the ending of a play to deliver its overall meaning, the point *The Writer* reaches does not seem quite the right place to stop. The vision of an alternative world – and an alternative theatrical form – glimpsed in scene 3 lingers powerfully, the juxtaposition of the scenes registering the gap between the world as it is now and the world as it could be. Perhaps, then, the greatest formal challenge of *The Writer* is not posed by individual scenes themselves but how the scenes relate to one another. Although some vestiges of narrative causality remain, the scenes are juxtaposed to undercut, contradict, and complicate one another. Indeed, building on Grochala's concept of "liquid dramaturgy", Ben Poore argues that *The Writer* puts "dialectical, argumentative episodes themselves in dialectical tension with more open, ambiguous forms [...] offering a Shavian discussion play using a Churchillian approach to character and language" (32). Within this structure, it becomes exceedingly difficult to work out which view, if any, is being endorsed by the play (although, of course, the politics of a play reside in far more places than the author's intentions).

However, whereas dialectics traditionally reach synthesis, it seems that the contradiction at the heart of *The Writer* – between the idealism of the young woman/ Writer and the pragmatism of the Director – cannot be resolved. *The Writer's* form is both shaped by deep ambivalence about its subject matter, and also produced feelings of ambivalence in some audience members (see Greenstreet). This ambivalence is particularly acute given that the play starts with a debate about the potential of theatre to generate social change, or even, by extension, the capacity of theatre to be political. Therefore, Hickson and the Writer are committed to working in a medium (theatre) that they know to be a flawed and inadequate tool; Hickson may believe form to be "where all subversion operates" (Hickson, Personal interview), but the subversiveness of theatre – particularly theatre produced in a partially-state-subsidised theatre like the Almeida – has limits. Dan Rebellato argues that *The Writer* is "a piece of despairing utopianism; the play hates where we are and tries to imagine somewhere else and is really not at all sure it has succeeded or that it *can* succeed" (Rebellato, "The Writer"). Through the ambivalence of its form, *The Writer* registers both a hunger for change and acknowledges the material restrictions that impede societal change on a structural level, within and beyond theatre. Hope and doubt.

"I want the world to change shape".

"I'm not sure theatre can".

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Jeanne Schaaf

Challenging Realism: The Confines of Domesticity in Morna Pearson's Plays

Abstract: Morna Pearson's plays draw on the tradition of domestic realism as she stages dysfunctional households with scathing humour in the Doric language of her native north-eastern Scotland. The four plays under study – *Distracted* (2006), *The Artist Man and the Mother Woman* (2012), *How to Disappear* (2017) and *Clearing* (2020) – portray odd duos or characters whose condition, behavior and language relegate them to the status of outsiders, endeavoring to find meaning in the life they lead. In these tragi-comic quests, the plays slightly distort and challenge reality to break stage realism and give a glimpse of other possible, less bleak, realities. These alternative versions of the world allow for a renewal of realism, which has been labelled “broken realism” by Elaine Aston. This study focuses on the representation of domestic realism in the plays and shows how ethical boundaries are questioned within the private space of the household. This allows Pearson to expose the invisibility of marginal characters and their quest for new modes of self-expression to escape their stifling environment. Competing discourses and representations of reality thus challenge the boundaries and traditional landmarks of domestic realism on stage, giving it a new twist, towards a renewed realism.

Introduction

Morna Pearson is a Scottish playwright, born in Elgin, Northeast Scotland. Her plays are written in Doric, the specific dialect of the area, which stands out vividly on stage and challenges the audience's reception. In her introduction to a collection of contemporary Scottish plays, Trish Reid describes Pearson's voice as “a kind of dark, skewed poetry rooted in the Doric dialect of Scots spoken in her native NorthEast” (“Introduction”). Mark Fisher, in his review of the play *The Artist Man and the Mother Woman*, also notes Pearson's talent for featuring “doric poetry in a disturbingly credible world” (Fisher, “The Artist Man”). Fisher's quasi-oxymoronic choice of words, “disturbingly credible world”, perfectly captures how Pearson's use of dialect redefines the confines of realism on stage.

The domestic realism of Morna Pearson's dark comedies portrays dysfunctional households and questions the possibility of self-assertion and, ultimately,

of creation itself beyond the frame of a bleak and controlling environment. With grim humour, all four plays under study (*Distracted* 2006, which won the Meyer Whitworth Award; *The Artist Man and the Mother Woman* 2012; *How to Disappear* 2017 and *Clearing* 2020) stage socially excluded households in which mothers are either abusive/incestuous or neglectful and fathers are absent. This narrative trend echoes other plays built around “unsuitable suitors”, a feature of the British stage in the 2000s according to Aleks Sierz (176–82). Sierz mentions, for example, Fiona Evan’s *Scarborough* (Royal Court, 2008), which stages the relationship between a female teacher and a male pupil; David Harrower’s *Blackbird* (King’s Theatre, Edinburgh, 2005), which is the dissection of a pedophile relationship between a man in his forties and a twelve-year-old girl; or Judy Upton’s *Sliding with Suzanne* (Royal Court Upstairs, 2001), which depicts an incestuous relationship between a 16-year-old boy and his foster mother. These provocative subject matters stage a space where the individuals placed in traditional positions of care and responsibility quickly become ethically dubious in the privacy of the home space.

Pearson’s *Distracted* (Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, 2006) portrays two duos of teenage boys and their mother figure against the backdrop of a “small residential caravan park” (scene 1). On the one hand, Jamie, damaged by the death of his junkie mother, collects insects and lives with his domineering and not entirely blameless Granny. On the other hand, the teenager George-Michael (named after the composer) lives with his sex-starved mother “Bunny” who explicitly cultivates ambiguous relationships with both boys. At the end of the play, social realism gives way to surreal imagery as Bunny and George-Michael metamorphose into butterflies. *The Artist Man and the Mother Woman* (Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, 2012) depicts a tortured inter-generational relationship between Geoffrey, an art teacher in his late thirties, and his controlling, incestuous mother Edie, who prevents him from truly reaching adulthood and building a relationship with another woman. The depiction of Geoffrey’s art offers a creative counterpart to the destructive forces at stake in the odd couple. In *How to Disappear* (Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, 2017), Robert, 28, and his sister Isla, 13, live alone as their mother has died and their father spends weekends at rave parties in Ibiza. Robert, who owns two pet tarantulas, an iguana, and a corn snake, has not left his room in twenty years, following the death of his favourite character in the comedy show “Neighbours”, an event which also led to his suffering from dermatillomania (the picking off of one’s skin). He spends his time attempting calculations to access a parallel universe. They receive a visit from Jessica, a social worker sent by the Department of Work and Pensions to assess Robert’s fitness for work. *Clearing* (2020) is part of National Theatre of Scotland’s response to the first wave of the pandemic in spring 2020 with the project *Scenes for Sur-*

vival: a series of performances staged and filmed in lockdown. This short 6-minute piece captures a teenager's chaotic lockdown reality, torn between two households, and ultimately fleeing her mother's X-box loving new boyfriend for her comforting father's pot noodle soups. On her journey through the forest, joining her parent's houses, a surreal twinkle in the sky catches her eye and opens up a new world. All four plays abruptly veer from the hyper-realist setting and language to a more supernatural set up.

In the words of Philip Howard, Pearson's use of social realism or hyper-realism is not an aesthetic claim *per se*, but she "knows that grounding her fable in the here and now is necessary in order for us to follow her on a magical journey" ("Introduction"). He calls this idiosyncratic aesthetics "Doric surrealism". Indeed, at first glance, the plays are rather conventional in the depiction of a suffocating domestic space, one akin to the tradition of the kitchen-sink drama or of the Pinteresque comedy of menace. However, Pearson's "realistic" domestic spaces and language are presented as ones that specifically stifle self-expression and artistic creation, both of which have to be relocated outside the confines of the domestic sphere, and of the theatrical genre itself. In many ways, her work is not particularly experimental, but it focuses on the motif of failed domesticity and the bounds it creates or dissolves.

In this respect, Pearson's work echoes Elaine Aston's reflections on post-feminism and the link between realism and feminism on stage. In her 1995 book entitled *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre*, Aston had initially described, along with other theatre scholars like Sue-Ellen Case and Jill Dolan, how realism on stage was labelled the *aporia* of feminism (37). The chapter "The case against realism" indeed shows how realism is built on linear systems of closure, where the subject of the narrative is usually male, and where women are only staged and defined in relation with the male subject – as wife, daughter, or mother for example (Aston, *Introduction* 38). Within an American context specifically, Kim Solga argues that "Ibsen's *Hedda*, Strindberg's *Miss Julie*, Pinero's *Mrs Tanqueray*, Shaw's *Mrs Warren*, Williams's *Laura* or *Blanche*: all exemplify the ways in which the early modernist 'problem' play was above all about 'problem' women, the difficulties they create for those around them, and the pleasures they afford in finally being figured out, reprimanded or cured" (32). In the same context, Sue Ellen Case states that "the heterosexist ideology linked with its stage partner, realism, is directed against women...the closure of these realistic narratives chokes the women to death and strangles the play of symbols" (297).

However, the British stage offers a different perspective on realism on stage which has also been critiqued by the feminist discourse but not rejected as a form. Indeed, as Kim Solga notes in *Theatre and Feminism*, since the middle

of the twentieth century British realist drama has been associated with socialist realism and with the progressive politics espoused at London's Royal Court Theatre (33). While more experimental forms also flourish on stage to give female experience a new frame, there has not been a rejection of the form, language and aesthetics of realism and many notable British feminist plays use conventional stage realism to voice feminist, progressive positions.

In the chapter "Bad Girls and Sick Boys: New Women Playwrights and the Future of Feminism", Aston defines a new type of realism called "broken realism". She defines the concept in the following terms: "antithetical to a Brechtian presentational mode of seeing, that feminist theatre previously adopted to serve its political interests, *broken realism* politicizes its spectators through playing by its own mimetic rules: showing the world that is, to the point where it cracks, crashes and is torn apart by the sheer weight of its own violence" (Aston, "'Bad Girls' and 'Sick Boys'" 85). This definition of "broken realism" perfectly describes the ambivalence of Pearson's work. Simultaneously anchored in the "the world that is" yet tearing apart the fabric of realism to expose its violence and oppressive structures through art, poetry, new modes of expression, or parallel universes, the plays also echo the distinctive aesthetic known as magic realism. In one of her even more recent chapters, entitled "Room for Realism", Elaine Aston scrutinizes "the more fluid uses, and potential political ends of realism deployed by women writing for the twenty-first century stage" and shows how they reflect "a shift away from those conservatively formed, phallogocentric uses of the genre that were previously the object of feminist criticism, opening up realist conventions to humancentric ends" (32).

Pearson's "fluid realism" or "broken realism" is "humancentric": she does not necessarily, or explicitly side with her female characters. On the contrary, her plays stage damaged characters, both male and female, crushed by isolation, pain, abuse, dysfunctional family links and the lack of socially progressive energies. Her characters are the "have nots" of the free market economy, casualties of the modern ethos of individualism and the overall rise of neoliberalism. Her plays are "humancentric" in the sense that they display a socially progressive form of fluid realism. Morna Pearson's plays show how imprisoning social realities are, making it a worthy reason for playwrights to adopt a form of theatrical realism, a genre to which Pearson gives an experimental twist in an attempt to 'deconfine' – or set free – both the characters and the modes of representation.

Through a closer look at the four plays previously mentioned, I will try to underline the extent to which the representation of the domestic space reveals its limits through the destabilization of traditional landmarks and opens up a space for new modes of representation within this formal frame. My study will focus on the representation of domestic realism and show how ethical bounda-

ries are questioned within the private space of the household. This allows Pearson to expose the invisibility of marginal characters and, in the same movement, to challenge the boundaries of domestic realism on stage, giving it a new twist.

The Confines of Domesticity: Flirting with Ethical Boundaries

In the plays under study, the fathers are absent,¹ leaving the domestic sphere to be ruled by women who create a space in which social and familial interactions reveal incestuous and/or abusive relationships. Far from being archetypes of motherly care, the feminine figures in each play unveil a network of failed affective bonds.

In Pearson's first full length play, *The Artist Man and The Mother Woman*,² Edie, a domineering mother and Geoffrey, her middle-aged son, are locked in a tortured relationship which, over the course of the play, evolves from grotesque comedy to absolute horror. Geoffrey unsuccessfully tries to forge or "create" his own identity and escape his mother's realm to reclaim his personal boundaries and find himself "a wifie" (Pearson, *AMMW* 170). Playing with the codes of realism on stage, the play destabilizes this falsely reassuring and well-known frame to expose its limits. The play is built around the traditional *topos* of a kitchen where the domestic bonds of the mother/son relationship are distorted so as to reveal an underlying tale of incest and murder. From the beginning, the mother imposes her domestic order on her son both verbally and physically as she enjoins him to "Och, jist shut up and eat [his] breakfast" (Pearson, *AMMW* 161) or repeatedly performs the daily gestures of motherly love which overstep personal boundaries and invade his intimate space as a grown man:

EDIE Come here
She licks her palm, flattens Geoffrey's hair down
 There we go. My cheekie wee handsome. (163)

EDIE Geoffrey come here. Yiv got jam.
Geoffrey leans in closer, she pulls him even closer, and proceeds to lick the jam off his cheek.
 GEOFFREY Thanks.
 EDIE Off you pop then. (168)

¹ Found dead drowned in *Distracted*; unknown yet fantasized by Geoffrey as the fisherman on the picture in the kitchen in *The Artist Man and the Mother Woman*; and raving at parties in *Ibiza* in *How to Disappear*.

² For more clarity the title will be abbreviated as *AMMW*.

Similarly disquieting gestures are commented upon in *Distracted* by the two teenagers, George-Michael and Jamie. The feeling of disgust at the smell of someone's breath on their face signals the need for placing physical boundaries as the boys are no longer toddlers.

GEORGE-MICHAEL. Aye, whatever. (*Wiping his mouth on his sleeve.*) Dinnae you hate it when your mither sees you've git a dirty face, but instead of saying 'you've git a dirty face' she says 'come here' and afore you ken it she's licked her thumb and wiped it on your mooth.

JAMIE. Aye.

GEORGE-MICHAEL. It's disgusting. And then the smell of her mingin saliva is stuck ontae your face.

JAMIE. Aye.

GEORGE-MICHAEL. Specially if she smokes.

JAMIE. Aye.

GEORGE-MICHAEL. Stinks. (Scene 8)

In addition to the focus on the orality of saliva, the presence of food on stage is also a way to draw attention to the body, both social and physiological. The dramaturgy of the eating body often reflects a crisis of togetherness. As a component of the domestic rite that unites the members of a family over a shared moment, it is often symbolic in Pearson's plays of the multiples failures of the individuals to establish healthy and sound relationships. As such, in these examples it becomes a revelation of the erotic nature of orality that evokes an unresolved "oral stage", in which "sexual activity has not yet been separated from the ingestion of food" according to Sigmund Freud's 1905 classification of the stages of the sexual life in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (64).

In *AMMW*, Geoffrey tries to introduce a different kind of yoghurt at the breakfast table, namely the French brand "Petits Filous", which translates as "little rascals" and can be read as his call for transgression and emancipation (Berton 310) and an attempt at entering the stage of adolescence, severing the link with his mother. Paradoxically, the name "Petits Filous" also calls to mind a marketing strategy targeting small children suggesting that Geoffrey's overpowering mother rules on his desires and needs as if he were still a child:

EDIE Jist yoghurt? Jist yoghurt? Whit hiv I telt you aboot they European wyes? I've warned you. Get rid o them. Get rid o them. I'm nae hivvin debaucherous filth in my kitchen! *She picks up a jar of jam and throws it at the wall, leaving a big red stain. Silence. Geoffrey is in shock.* (Pearson, *AMMW* 200)

The violence and disproportion of Edie's reaction, materialized by a series of repetitions, the ambiguous use of "debaucherous filth", and the smashing of a jar of jam on the wall reveal the nature of her controlling attitude over her son. Linking

food and erotic impulse in a disturbing yet comic way is a frequent strategy in Pearson's plays. In *Distracted*, the sexual innuendos are even more blatant when Bunny invites Jamie over to share the pie she baked for her son George-Michael and herself:

BUNNY. Bunny. Ca' me Bunny. And I'm nae mairried myself.

Her look lingers.

Aye, alright. I've got a pie. It's big enough for ain mair.

(To GEORGE-MICHAEL.) Oh, Jamie'll love my pie, won't he, darling?

(To JAMIE.) George-Michael loves his mammy's cookin. Cannae get enough. He's been fingerin my pie all afternoon. (Scene 1)

The triangulation of the conversation led by Bunny, whose name is also reminiscent of a sexualized being as in "bunny girl", and the semantic shifts – with the polysemic use of the word "fingering" and the metaphor "fingering my pie" – blur the boundaries between nurturing maternal love and an incestuous relationship.

In *How to Disappear*, Robert states "I can ainly eat soft foods. My teeth are sair" (Scene 2) and later in the play he shares a Milky Way with his sister (Scene 13), tokens both of his regression to a child-like type of food (soft foods) and possibly of the parallel universe, the Milky Way, he and his sister try to reach through his calculations.

This ambiguous and disturbing relationship to the body is taken to extremes with references to illness and unwanted physical proximity. In *Distracted*, Granny presents herself as the epitome of the grandmother in a pink wooly jumper who demands hugs from her grandson, while simultaneously revealing the deception that makes the wooly jumper only a prop to conceal "the rattling death that she is" within and to make the contact softer:

GRANNY. Come and gie your granny a hug.

JAMIE. Umm...

GRANNY. I put this cardigan on specially. That's what we grannies do. We wrap ourselves up in pink fluffy cardigans to make it a little easier for you to hug the rattling death that is Granny. (Pearson, *Distracted* Scene 4)

This scene is repeated several times over the course of the play and George-Michael and Bunny, as well as Jamie, also wear the pink wooly cardigan at some point and utter Granny's words "I put this cardigan on specially", like a mesmerizing chorus embodying the purportedly responsible adults. This circulation of the pink wooly jumper and the cues associated with it, the intentionality of the outfit and the invitation to cuddle only make the final revelation more brutal and tragic, when, in a final scene, Jamie confronts Granny about the "sugar coat-

ed pills” she kept offering him over the course of the play to “mak everything a little easier to swallow”:

JAMIE. I’ve got a sore heed.

GRANNY. D’you wint granny to tuck you into bed and give you a pill to make your nasty headache go away? A sugar-coated pill. Maks everything a little easier to swallow, doesn’t it?

JAMIE. I wint tae go oot tae play. (Pearson, *Distracted* Scene 4)

In the final scene, he gathers she was the one feeding the “sugar coated pills” to his mother, leading to her addiction, and ultimately, to her death as she became a drug addict. At that point, the buttons of the pink woolly cardigan fall off just as her mask falls off, and we understand that Granny is none other than “the har-binger of death and peddler of suicide” (Howard “Introduction”):

The buttons fall off her cardigan.

GRANNY. Oh, my buttons. She asked for it. She asked me to.

JAMIE. No. You went in with her pills.

GRANNY. She asked me to.

JAMIE. No. You shut the door. (Scene 15)

This blurring of boundaries, between what is maternal care and what constitutes a threat to physical integrity, is also present in *AMMW* when Geoffrey wonders if he has caught a cold and is told by Edie “Weel, yiv nae a temperature. So, I prescribe a hug fae your mammy” (164). She also later reminds him that he cannot be independent if he climbs into his mother’s bed: “Independent, aye? The same independent manny that crawled intae his mammy’s bed last night for a spooning coz he couldnae sleep?” (173). The polysemy of the word “spooning” once again underlines the incestuous nature of this duo, in which Edie explicitly ends up deflowering her son under the guise of a metaphor about birds and bees:

GEOFFREY Are the birds the wifies and the bees the mannies? Oh wait. I ken, the birds eat the berries and they poop oot the seeds and then the seeds grow intae trees and then the bumble bees –

EDIE (puts a finger over his mouth to hush him) How about I jist show you ...

She lets her dressing gown slip down to expose a bare shoulder. (Pearson, *AMMW* 197)

These repeated abuses and failures lead to an inability to build one’s self or result in a real physical disintegration, as Robert testifies in *How to Disappear* when Jessica asks him to describe his illness, only to sum it up as “skin rash” in the official paperwork she has to fill in:

ROBERT My illness is ... eh ... weel. I've pulled oot maist o my hair. I've peeled off maist o my skin. I'm in constant pain. I've got various weeping sores and ulcers. My skin is hypersensitive tae the natural light. So's my eyes. I've nae left the hoose in ... aboot twinty year. Nae left this room in aboot twelve. I canna seem tae keep track o time. It either goes tee fast or goes tee slow. Sometimes it jumps and I dinna kain far I am a'taegither. I dinna sleep weel, if at 'a. I get chest pains. Hert palpitations. I can ainly eat soft foods. My teeth are sair. Maist o my toenails hiv gone fungal and dropped off.

JESSICA Hm. *Beat.* Skin rash. *Writes.* Right, next question – (scene 1)

These few examples show that a stifling lock-up gradually turns into a nightmare, as the incestuous or abusive encounters destabilize the initial spatial frame and relational boundaries, ultimately destabilizing the confines of domesticity. Between farce and tragedy, Pearson's use of raw themes, language and images plunge the spectator into an awareness of the cruelty of the social realities depicted.

Exposing Invisibility

The portraits and voices of vulnerable populations are often taken over by normative discourses which silence or make invisible figures of non-conformity such as minorities, immigrants, disabled, precarious or poor people. Their exclusion from systems of power and dominant ideology results in a form of dispossession or invisibility. In Morna Pearson's work, the representation of dissonant voices thus raises political questions of visibility. In his as yet untranslated work *L'Invisibilité sociale*, French philosopher Guillaume Le Blanc argues that invisibility is rooted in a monopoly of voices whose narrative contributes to dehumanise or invisibilise certain lives (41). The characters in the plays are all portrayed in a state of distress or marginality that ultimately makes them want to become invisible, to disappear. The numerous metaphors of spectrality in the plays can be correlated to this invisibility, making the characters akin to "living ghosts": "all are frequently – sometimes to the point of cliché – likened to ghosts or related figures, on the basis of their lack of social visibility, unobtrusiveness, enigmatic abilities or uncertain status between life and death" (Peeren 5). These outsiders are brought to the center on stage in this singular dramaturgy where Pearson's humour and language unexpectedly reveal the tragedy unfolding before the audience, exposing the mechanisms of invisibility.

Jamie's focus on the microcosmic world of insects in *Distracted* makes him consider the cycle of life through the lens of evolution, only to reach the bleak conclusion that things disappear, like his father and mother did. The paratactic

rhythm of the sentence, punctuated like a heartbeat, contrasts in tone and imagery with the rest of the play:

JAMIE (*sighs*). Observing change. It's interesting how things change. Change. Move. Grow. Bigger. Smaller. Colour. Open. Close. Multiply. Bloom. Pale. Disappear. Disappear.

Beat.

Disappear. (Pearson, *Distracted* Scene 8)

It is echoed by the last image of the play as Jamie remembers how much his mother used to enjoy swimming in the sea, and he understands how this immersion eased her into a state of painless invisibility: "And now I see. The salt water made your tears seem... smaller. Your pain seem... less. Your body seem... paler. Almost made you... disappear. *Pause*. Disappear." (Pearson, *Distracted* Scene 15). The three dots that dig a hole in the syntax and the comparative forms "smaller" and "paler" graphically materialise the spectralisation of his mother in Jamie's speech. It is a paradoxical epiphany as he starts by "now I see", the verb to see drawing attention to the visibility of the process of disappearance. In the same play, Bunny also resorts to an organic metaphor, describing the caravan park as a breathing head to put into words her feeling of suffocation, and her inability to escape, move, or change her destiny:

BUNNY. I feel like there's a big plastic bag over the caravan park. But the park's actually a head. A huge breathing head. And wi every breath the bag gets tighter – (...) Suffocating. That's whit's happening. Being suffocated. And it's nae like we can move. We cannae afford tae. (Pearson, *Distracted* Scene 10)

Life itself ("wi every breath") in this caravan park is what accelerates the suffocation, the literal asphyxia of its inhabitants. Even more explicitly, the characters of *How to Disappear* all refer to their fate as unbearable to the point they are made to – or wish to – disappear. Robert, becoming somehow medium as he observes the social worker, Jessica, when she interviews him, starts to understand her, read her, and voice her most intimate fears and thoughts. In a surreal act of telepathy, he describes her retreating into a cupboard as a child, hiding from abusive adults, and wishing to disappear.

ROBERT But you continued tae hide. Wishing they'd stop looking for you. Wishing they wisna bithered. Wishing their memory o you wid start tae fade. And eventually, they'd forget you ivver existed. I kain you didna wint tae die. You jist winted tae disappear.

She nods. (Pearson, *How to Disappear* Scene 8)

In a form of communion, he also calls for her to understand that he is going through the same ordeal and that his skin-picking illness is a literal materialization of his wish to disappear, a spectralisation of his own body, vanishing behind bandages:

And noo, d'you unnerstand how I've got nae hair and skin. Bandages are my covers I vanish ahind. My skin has become a thin shell. Becoming mair translucent wi every layer I peel. Dinna tell, but I'm picking it awa tae nuthin. And I mean nuthin. It's becoming invisible. Jessica, I'm starting tae disappear. (Pearson, *How to Disappear* Scene 8.)

The lexical field of disappearance saturates the excerpt with words like “vanish”, “thin shell”, “translucent”, “picking awa tae nuthin”, “invisible”, “disappear” which articulate Robert's suffering and paradoxically reconstitute a sense of self through his speech and his bond with Jessica. When the characters do not explicitly want to disappear, like Robert's sister Isla, it is the social violence of others, and of the institution, or even of society as a whole, that negates their voice and experience as an individual and makes them invisible. Indeed, when Isla, who is harassed by her classmates, turns to the school staff for help, her teacher punishes her and locks her in a library, leading her to draw her own conclusion:

Left a' day staring at books that dinna mak ony sense. Except I kain whit maks sense. I'm the problem. I'm the problem for the teachers. Mak me disappear and ah'hin's fuckin lovely for the teachers. And it's fuckin rosey for the radges. They continue tae get a full education while I rot ma brains oot in a wee room. (Pearson, *How to Disappear* Scene 9)

Pearson's work thus examines the family and social mechanisms that marginalize, or even annihilate the characters. Paradoxically, we as audience watch them wanting to disappear; we witness their will to vanish. As they are not fully integrated in society nor fully excluded from it, the in-between status of these spectral or invisible lives maps an uncertain territory emerging from the tension between spectacularisation and invisibility. These features also question the ethics of witnessing and the engagement of the audience.³

While exposing the invisibilisation and invisibility of marginal characters, the playwright also gives a new visibility to language. As Andras Beck develops in his analysis of *AMMW*, the playwright shifts the linguistic center margin dy-

³ See Aragay, Mireia “To Begin to Speculate: Theatre Studies, Ethics and Spectatorship,” *Ethical Speculations in Contemporary British Theatre*, edited by Mireia Aragay and Enric Monforte. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014.

namic of the theatrical representation. For the Edinburgh audience of the Traverse Theatre where all three plays premiered, Pearson's Doric eloquence can only be received and identified as non-local. Furthermore, this northeastern dialect is quite uncommon on the theatrical stage and as such it is layered with semantic echoes. Indeed, it provides a strong sense of place and class (Beck 208), even if Ian Brown explains that Doric is often misinterpreted as "a sub-dialect of a particular deprived class" (61). The central audiences are somehow marginalized as they are reminded that they don't belong to the microcosm staged in front of them and although the action is simultaneously close, it is geographically distant. In Pearson's plays, the Doric idioms and expressions build a seemingly light comedy, based on comic tropes, but as Trish Reid notes "Pearson's use of comedy is both hilarious and disconcerting because it is counterbalanced at the play's climax with a savage reminder that we have been laughing at the wilful stunting of human potential" (Introduction).

Between farce and tragedy, menace looms in the various puns and the comic relief destabilises the audience who understands what they've been laughing at. As J.L. Styan states when he defines comic relief in *The Dark Comedy: the Development of Modern Comic Tragedy*, "the peculiar tensions [...] arise not only from the total irony of the events in their course, but as well from the many and detailed moments misleadingly called comic 'relief', moments carefully thrust into the tragic action to make the pain the more acute" (17). The spectator's initial sense of distance is crushed instantly by the awareness of a shared humanity: the stories of chaos, loss, pain, and existential angst emerge between two bursts of laughter. The comic twists only temporarily divert attention from the underlying violence of these tales of contemporary Scottish households. Philip Howard praises this method when arguing that the playwright's major achievement is "to tell a story of such intense pain and loss, but in such an unflaggingly hilarious way, that we don't notice the hurt until it's too late".

However, in the hollow of the invisibility and violence that govern domestic interactions, Pearson's plays also constitute an attempt to challenge both the reality of the characters and the genre of realism on stage. "*Broken realism*" is invited on stage by means of a variety of parallel discursive methods that allow the audience to perceive the possibility of change, self-assertion, poetry, and the faith in other worlds, instead of merely condemning the characters to their fate.

Challenging Domestic Realism

Because the characters are locked into inescapable cycles of violence and domestic patterns, the only way for them to reclaim a sense of individual identity

and find a voice for themselves is to escape the domestic narrative constructs in which they are stuck. Competing with a traditional representation of domestic action and space, a different semiotic language somehow allows Geoffrey (*AMMW*), Jamie (*Distracted*) and Robert (*How to Disappear*) to find a voice of their own and negotiate with the bleak reality they live in.

In *AMMW*, the endlessly repetitive and trivial dialogues, focusing almost entirely on food and/or domestic arrangements, blatantly contrast with Geoffrey's articulate and very lyrical descriptions of his own paintings. Indeed, the shed in which he paints becomes the liberating space of creativity, building up a parallel narrative in the play, based on *ekphrasis*. At first, he paints still-lives using his mother's pots for inspiration. The motif of the still life echoes the lack of personal expression and is only a continuity of the domestic pattern in the play. Yet as he falls in love with a former student of his at the local Sainsbury's, his art changes and becomes a means of expression rather than sheer reproduction/representation. He starts bringing the plants he paints to life: a spider plant he describes as "almost alive", "moving and creeping" (Pearson, *AMMW* 202). This first step of his awakening – both as an artist and as a man – is then accentuated with the *ekphrasis* of his traumatic relationship with his mother. The following description of his painting, that Geoffrey addresses to the picture of the fisherman he believes to be his father, reads as a disturbing confession of an existential quest in which the imagery and metaphors bring together birth ("its womb is sliced open and there nestled inside, unharmed is a sleeping human baby"), suicide ("his owner's grey and lifeless body hinges fae a branch"), metaphysical thirst for meaning ("the jaws o a tarry black monster wi hollow eyes that contain the emptiness o our existence") and ultimately love ("when a' thing goes dark I hiv her face pulling me tae the surface").

Did I tell you that? I wis painting fruit and foliage afore she came intae my life. Noo they're ... different. Very different. I've painted a horse, slit fae its neck tae its groin, its womb is sliced open and there nestled inside, unharmed, is a sleeping human baby. And a skinny emaciated cat sitting on a living room windaesill, looking outside tae a tree far his owner's grey and lifeless body hinges fae a branch. And blood-spattered albino bats flying intae a cave which is actually the jaws o a tarry black monster wi hollow eyes that contain the emptiness o our existence. And then there's her. When a' hing goes dark I hiv her face pulling me tae the surface. I paint her a lot. Jist the wye she appears in my dreams. (Pearson, *AMMW* 202)

Finally, the description of the triptych as a self-portrait can be read as actual *birth* of "the artist man" as he comes into focus through a zooming effect. Indeed, the first instalment represents a "manny deid. Too distant tae make oot fa it is"; the second one "has bin magnified by 75 per cent" and he becomes rec-

ognizable as the subject of the painting. The third instalment “is further magnified by 75 per cent” and the scene focuses on his heart, “Holding it up for all – i.e. you – tae see. My bloody heart”. The very vivid hypotyposis of the description of the paintings is an expressive tool to voice the emotions that could not be spoken/seen on stage. Geoffrey generates himself as the artist/man exposing the pain for both his love interest and the audience to see:

I’ve painted you these. Three. It’s a trilogy. In the first, you’ll see it’s a manny deid. Too distant tae mak oot fa it is or whit’s happened, but there’s a hint o red around the chest area. In the second instalment, you’ll see the scene has bin magnified by 75 per cent. And you’ll notice that the deid manny is beginning tae tak a likeness tae mysel’. Geoffrey Buncher. Lyin wi a hole far my heart used tae be. In the third instalment, which again is magnified by a further 75 per cent, you’ll notice the scene centres around the heart. My bloody, still, but slightly warm, heart. My heart held in my hand. My bloody hand that cut oot my ain heart. Holding it up for all – i.e. you – tae see. My bloody heart. Wi a word carved on it. That word being your name. Evelyn” (Pearson, *AMMW* 210)

Beyond the frame of Pearson’s realism, and its blunt interactions, the ekphrasis thus reveals the depth of the unseen and the unspoken on stage, the broken heart of the hero. His quest for independence does not impede the shocking outcome of the play in which Edie brutally murders Evelyn, Geoffrey’s secret love interest. The importance of this tense dynamic between creation and destruction is also highlighted by the work’s title, a reference to a passage in George Bernard Shaw’s *Man and Superman* (1903), where the mother-artist relationship is described thusly:

... the artist’s work is to shew us ourselves as we really are. Our minds are nothing but this knowledge of ourselves; and he who adds a jot to such knowledge creates new mind as surely as any woman creates new men. In the rage of that creation he is as ruthless as the woman, as dangerous to her as she to him, and as horribly fascinating. Of all human struggles there is none so treacherous and remorseless as the struggle between the artist man and the mother woman. Which shall use up the other? That is the issue between them. And it is all the deadlier because, in your romanticist cant, they love one another. (414)

This passage depicts the relationship of both the mother and the artist as creators, whose primary activity is fueled by the other’s and yet consumed by it. In these terms, then, the need to dominate or even annihilate is encoded in an artist’s identity so as to create and become oneself an “Artist Man”.

In *How to Disappear*, the competing discourse which opens up a breach in the realistic fabric of the play is Robert’s scientific fascination with numbers and calculation. Those (as well as the scientific magazines, and several experiments he tries out with his pet insects) are tools in his quest for a parallel uni-

verse accessed through time travel, an elsewhere, where things would be different, possibly better. The first stage direction, describing the claustrophobic universe of a room Robert hasn't left in twelve years, reads as follows:

In Robert's room there are many alarm clocks sitting; perhaps they are numbered or coloured differently. The walls are mostly covered with bits of paper with handwritten data on them, occasional equations and miscellaneous diagrams, graphs and illegible writing. Some of this has been scribbled straight onto the wall, when a piece of paper couldn't be found. There is a door to a large walk-in cupboard.

(Pearson, *How to Disappear* scene one)

In the parallel world, the one that would exist behind his wardrobe and that he tries to reach by dint of calculations and predictions, Robert is not searching for his father or for adventures as he first pretends but for truth, for "comfort and calm and relief fae the pain". Mania and scientific rigor produce a channel for self-expression and a different semiotics for Robert to find meaning in an existence like his, a true ontological quest (like that of Geoffrey's paintings). He explains it in these terms to Jessica:

JESSICA So whit wis you looking for?

ROBERT Ma dad.

JESSICA You wis lookin for mair than your dad.

ROBERT S'pose. Whit I wis looking for, in a' that work ... wis ... the truth. I wis looking clarity in a' the confusion. I wis looking for beauty in a' this ugliness. I wis looking for control in a' the chaos. I wis looking for comfort and calm and relief fae the pain. I wis looking for peace. And proof that there is mair tae life than jist being a mannier like me. (Scene 16)

It is his pet tarantula that will be the first to successfully travel through time. The microcosm of his pet insects, which he cares for in a way that he himself has never been cared for, establishes a parallel with the character's own situation, living out his life in his room, under the gaze of the audience. It is in an implicit comparison with his tarantulas that Robert refers to existence as a grueling struggle:

ROBERT See, male tarantulas only live about two years and they spend their hale short lives in complete distress, frantically trying tae get their end away. And then, fully exhausted, they crumple up and die. (Scene 1)

The metaphor of insects as an organic microcosm and as a *mise en abyme* of a field of observation is also found in *Distracted* where Jamie observes, collects, and comments on insects throughout the play. They thus become the new focus, briefly allowing the character to withdraw himself from our gaze or anal-

ysis which therefore focuses on something else. These passages often read like metaphors that allow Jamie to put into words the violence that surrounds him, and to find meaning in the world. He uses, for example, the model of the praying mantis that devours its husband after mating to explain the absence of George-Michael's father:

JAMIE. Um, s'pose. Whit about your dad? Beat. Did he die shortly after mating wi your mither?

They laugh.

GEORGE-MICHAEL. Aye.

JAMIE. Did she eat him up and shite oot his bones and feathers?

They laugh.

GEORGE-MICHAEL. Aye.

JAMIE. Did she inject a digestive juice intae his cephalothorax and abdomen and suck up his fluid remains?

JAMIE *laughs*.

GEORGE-MICHAEL. Nut. He's yin of they bikers. (Pearson, *Distracted* Scene 6)

This extended metaphor reaches a climax at the end of the play in a surreal poetic moment when Bunny and George-Michael turn into butterflies. Bunny, as she announces that she is leaving for a new life in Japan, to embrace her passion in the land that is "the hame of karaoke", states "I'm nae a whorey old moth, Jamie. I'm a beautiful butterfly" (Scene 14). This is followed by "a large flutter of wings" (Scene 14) and the appearance of Bunny and George Michael as butterflies. The metamorphosis epitomizes the ultimate escape and rebirth from a state of "moth" – which evokes insalubrity, decay and parasites – to a state of butterfly – associated to transformation, spring, rebirth and beauty. This symbolism may be evocative of the myth of Psyche – often depicted with butterfly wings – whose name in Greek refers to the "breath of life" but also by extension to the butterfly or the soul as opposed to the body. The myth symbolizes the destiny of the fallen soul, which after many trials rises, transforms, and unites with a divine love in a promise of rebirth or a better future life. Beyond the myth, the way of interpreting the psyche develops with the philosophical thought. In their *Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines*, Charles-Victor Daremberg and Edmond Saglio recall that:

The orphic sects proclaim the superior nature of the soul: the body is only a tomb, a prison, where the soul has fallen as a result of sin; the ideal is to be freed from the body forever, hence the theory of metempsychosis: the soul purifies itself by a series of births and new incarnations and leaves its prison once and for all. This doctrine is taken up by the theo-

logians and thinkers; Empedocles and Plato are penetrated by it.⁴ (Daremborg and Saglio 745).

Thus, the metamorphosis of the characters is like a metempsychosis, a form of rebirth and new incarnation leading to better prospects than the realm of realism. This structuring metaphor of transformation is also mirrored by the slight metamorphosis of the realist stage whose conventions and language are twisted to tear open the fabric of reality and go beyond it. The occurrence of magic realism, the pseudo-scientific quest for a parallel universe, or the self-representation through the art of painting become means of transformation both for the characters but also for domestic realism on stage: it is challenged and transformed by alternative discourses and modes of representation to escape an imprisoning form.

Playing with Theatrical Boundaries

*Clearing*⁵ is one of the works produced for the *Scenes for Survival* project for the National Theatre of Scotland during the first Covid lockdown in Spring 2020. Filmed in isolation, this short 6-minute solo performance, was “released” online in June 2020. It features a teenager in her bedroom who struggles to find somewhere to call home during the lockdown. The protagonist uses the domestic interior as the space in which to bring her family bonds under critical scrutiny. The one-room setting becomes a space with no other possibility of exit than her imagination. The spatial frame also conjures up domestic realism as it features the room of a teenage girl, yet both the narration and the medium of the video format challenge aesthetic and theatrical boundaries.

The spatial frame is destabilized as viewers don't necessarily know they are watching a play (unless accessed through the website but the videos were also posted on Instagram). The spatial references of the theatre only subsist in the website's indication. Left theatreless by the lockdown, the performance and audience are relocated on a virtual stage. We are an implied audience until the final twist where we understand that the teenager was addressing this message to her schoolteacher to justify her undone homework. The audience's experience is thus challenged: we might feel we have witnessed a piece of intimate confession

⁴ My translation.

⁵ See *Clearing, Scenes for Survival*, Morna Pearson, NTS: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gm5ZgxF5ujQ>

at first even though the monologue has one targeted audience, redefining our very role as spectators in this interaction. Moreover, we watch the “play” in self-isolation ourselves, on our computers, probably in a domestic sphere with no means of relating or engaging with other audience members.

As for the narrative, in a broken family, or non-nuclear family, the teenager appears simultaneously home bound (through governmental law) and *homeless* as she doesn't feel she belongs either with her mother or father. Visually, we enter the private space of her bedroom, yet this space is threefold: at first the frame is recognizable, but this domestic setting is only the stage for other spaces to materialize visibly through her speech. The spatial references destabilize the initial frame, as, through hypotyposis, she takes us to her uncaring mother's, her dying father's and the woods where she spends time so as to avoid both unhappy households. The action of the play unfolds beyond the stage of confined domesticity as the teenager engages with a narrative trend that breaks away from realism. She relates a tall tale set in the woods where she stages an alien encounter in the midst of a clearance. The encounter also leaves her feeling rejected as she dreams of aliens that come to “get her and take her away”. The vivid and imaginative description opens a breach in the realistic world of her teenage room and routine to reveal – through the tale of a paranormal episode – what's left unseen on stage: her need for a sense of belonging and togetherness.

The frames of the video also challenge the aesthetic experience of the audience: with a zoom on the teenager's face, the sense of shared intimacy (though mediated through a screen) is exacerbated. Echoing the confessional styles of online videos (of YouTube influencers for instance), these intimate performances of domesticity and narratives are designed for anonymous viewers from whom we seek an ersatz of love, self-worth, and identity. Part of a larger project, this very short experimental piece thus draws on similar themes as the previously explored printed plays and reflects upon what lockdown means for the theatre: the necessity to go beyond an institutional space and explore new spaces or means of representation.

Ironically enough, Elaine Aston was using the metaphor of the virus to discuss the mutation of theatrical forms of realism on stage long before the pandemic. She states that: “while ‘social’ endures in its adjectival attachments to realism, thinking of this heterogeneity I am encouraged to propose one final, qualifying description: viral realism – realism as infectious, contagious and spreading from a ‘host’ of playwrights. With its capacity for genetic mutation, ‘new’ strains of realism find fertile ground when realities are such that the humanity that cannot be lived needs to be expressed, revealed and to make itself felt; when the inhospitable environment demands critical scrutiny and to be held to account” (Aston, “‘Bad Girls’ and ‘Sick Boys’” 33). In Pearson's works,

“realism” has indeed mutated to break free from a sense of imprisonment – be it literal (in a domestic space), metaphorical (in a relationship) or formal (in a genre). Self-expression/definition and visibility are only possible *beyond* the domestic space and the frame of realism, through other types of competing narratives and poetic imageries. Her aesthetics give an experimental twist to realism, echoing the definition of “broken realism” as “a realism that reflects a being-in-the-world-that-is, fractured by a desire for other lives, other worlds” (Aston, “‘Bad Girls’ and ‘Sick Boys’” 84).

These plays stage marginalized characters of both genders who are victims of systems of power that jeopardize their ability to express, define or empower themselves. Their stories expose their invisibility and create new spaces for expression offering a glimpse of alternative realities. Morna Pearson's plays thus exemplify a return to both domestic space and realism, theatrical trends that have long been criticized by feminist theory. However, formally those plays stage attempts to escape from imprisoning forms of realism and domestic frames – an effort to deconfine or regenerate the form by inserting other spaces and discourses of representation within the initial frame.

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Claire H  lie

Alice Birch – A Poet in the Theatre

Abstract: Simon Stephens called Alice Birch “a writer of exquisite poetry and unerring savagery” in the introduction to his interview with the playwright for the Royal Court podcast. Many other critics and reviewers also use the adjective “poetic” to describe her handling of language and dialogue, an adjective that is often used, probably for lack of a better one, to describe any poet’s experiment with the tenets of realism, especially if she is a woman.

This chapter purports to take the word “poetic” in its stylistic sense and enquire into the linguistic dimension of Birch’s style. Through a close reading of excerpts from *We Want You to Watch* (2015), *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again.* (2016), *Anatomy of a Suicide* (2017), and *[BLANK]* (2019), Birch’s experimentations with concrete poetry, rhetorical devices and literary genres will be delineated.

By considering the poetic nature of Birch’s texts, this chapter shows how it participates in creating a feminist soundscape that locates the traumatic experience of patriarchy in language, and suggests the in-yr-ear stage can participate in revolutionizing the world.

Introduction

The first two decades of the twenty-first century have seen a resurgence of feminist writing on stage and a continuing interrogation of how to best express feminist concerns in plays that are not merely issue-based, but also focused on playwriting. Caryl Churchill, debbie tucker green, Ella Hickson, among many others, have engaged in “feminist dramaturgies” and “shar[e] an acute interest in feminism and stylistic innovation” (Fragkou 334). The “loss of feminism” (Aston 575) as a collective, communal experience they register in their plays, leads them to look for new forms of care that demand a new dramatic language, one that explores generic boundaries and especially the poetic nature of language.

In his preface to *The Poet in the Theatre* (1946), a series of essays dedicated to the dramatic works of a dozen – male – playwrights (T.S. Eliot, Chekov, Synge, and Yeats to name but a few), Ronald Peacock claims his book offers “the record of how a few authors tried to maintain the poetic integrity of drama against competition from outside and inside” (vii). While reminding his reader that poetry (in the sense of verse) and drama were coterminous in the olden days, he blames the novel, the lyric and the socially aware play for the great divide that began in the

late 19th century and that exiled poetry from the stage. Yet, what he labels “poetic” in the essays is far more elusive and shifty than merely “versified”: anything that resists “the lamentably prosaic taste of bourgeois realist drama” (86), anything that shows “imaginative vitality” in a way akin to the tenets of Romanticism (viii), anything that searches for a technique of presenting “mental experience” “in the hostile conditions of the theatre” (viii) (be it ritual drama or the chorus) can be deemed “poetic”. The poet in the theatre does not have to deal with rhyme and rhythm, but needs an agenda that transcends “prosaic realism” (81).

If one understands the phrase “a poet in the theatre” as a way to designate a writer who has written verse before turning to writing plays or a poet who writes plays in verse – like Glyn Maxwell, Liz Lochhead, or Tony Harrison – the label may not be fruitful when it comes to analysing the works of Alice Birch, since the playwright has not published any poetry collection nor any single poem and does not write verse drama. Nor is poetry treated as a theme in her plays; nor is any character a poet, professional or amateur; nor do the characters express a desire to “poetically [...] dwell” (Heidegger 213), like what Howard Brenton did with Shelley in *Bloody Poetry* (1984). If one understands the phrase as a way to describe an author who relishes in flowery, artistic, tasteful, or even oneiric writing, this would be a blatant case of misreading of Birch’s works since she warns her readers: “More importantly, the play should not be well-behaved” (Birch 2016, 19).

Nevertheless, the adjective “poetic” is frequently used by theatre reviewers to describe her writing. Commenting on *Little Light* (2015), the first play Birch wrote (but which was only performed a few years after), Matt Trueman writes: “The dialogue can seem over-stewed: insistently poetic, rather than accidentally so”, and claims that it is partly what “undercuts the play’s emotional release”. Conversely, Natasha Tripney, in her review of *Many Moons* (2011), finds Birch’s poetic style efficient in eliciting an emotional response: “Birch’s writing is poetic and rich in imagery so when she slides in an unsettling detail, which she often does, it’s doubly shocking.” Poetic here would refer to what, according to Patrice Pavis in “Poésie et Théâtre”, is related to the “ornementation of dialogue” (186), a kind of stylistic effect made to please or surprise the audience while displaying the playwright’s virtuosity, without questioning the dramatic form. After being deeply moved by the performance of *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again.* (2014) in Melbourne, Sandra D’Urso muses on the potential symbolical meaning of the play, due to the fact that “the language is more poetic than realist”. Another reviewer, for Culture Whisper, describes the way the staging and the writing of *Anatomy of a Suicide* (2018) work together to create connections across different time frames: “But as you adjust to the rhythm of this triple-stream, new meanings are made as

words connect across the time periods, creating starkly poetic sentences from different snippets of monologues” (“Royal Court Review”). More generally, The Arts Foundation pinpoints the poetic nature of Birch’s dialogues: “A constant reference to Birch’s work is its meticulousness in whichever medium she works, and the richness of her poetic and vivid dialogues” (“Fellow in 2014 for Playwrighting”).

Beside reviewers, even renowned critics and fellow playwrights use the word “poetry” to describe her works. For instance, Lucy Perman, former Clean Break Chief Executive, mentions “the poetry of Alice Birch’s *Little on the Inside*” (x) in her introduction to *Rebel Voices: Monologues for Women by Women*; and in the interview he conducted for his Royal Court Podcast, Simon Stephens introduces her as “a writer of exquisite poetry and unerring savagery”. One may be tempted to read in the expansive use of the word “poetic” a lack of semantic sharpness – does it refer to Birch’s handling of the dialogues, which are based on silences more than words and therefore trigger the audience’s imagination? To her inventiveness with words and their interconnection? To her attention to the sounds the words make?

Alice Birch herself uses the word and indeed, there is some self-professed evidence that she is, to some extent, interested in poetry. For instance, in that same interview with Stephens, she says “I’m sure I tried to write poetry” as a teenager, only to admit that what she actually wrote at that tender age did not exactly reach the standards she had set for herself. Finally, in a series entitled “Recipe for Revolt” on the Soho rep. website, she lists poets Anne Carson, David Harsent, Sharon Olds, Sylvia Plath, Jacob Polley and Anne Sexton, all very formal poets, with a keen interest in emotional, social and political turmoil, alongside playwrights Caryl Churchill, Martin Crimp and Mark Ravenhill, critics like Fain Dines or photographers like Claire Aho, Chris Killip and Francesca Woodman. Poetry is also a matter of specific literary influences.

Therefore, this paper will focus on how the playtext resorts to several poetic devices, to previous poems and to poetic genres so as to turn the reader’s and the audience’s attention to the sounds and sense the words make when combined in a nonstandard way. It will not include analysis of what Hans-Thies Lehmann calls “the poetry of the stage” (47) and “the poetry of stage and light” but it will instead focus on “the text as poetry” (59), which will ultimately help convey the scenic quality of these poetic devices. Birch is indeed very aware of the poetic function of language and claims “the rhythm and every word must have an impact on spectators. On stage, you cannot go back to the page, so the rhythm and the choice of words is more important than the meaning” (“La Jeunesse au théâtre”). More precisely, the paper will show how the poetic nature of Birch’s texts participates in creating a feminist soundscape that undermines language, which

she denounces as a “man-made structure” (Stephens, “Royal Court Podcast”). Birch writes against what has become mechanical in language, she writes against clichés through slogans and billboards, or more precisely, she uses the aesthetic of the cliché to shed light on how any speech act amounts to parroting previous patriarchal discourses. The corpus will comprise Birch’s latest plays – *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again* (2014), *Anatomy of a Suicide* (2017), and *[BLANK]* (2018) in so far as they can be said to have shifted from her earlier plays which are deemed less experimental and closer to well-made plays.

The Playtext as Concrete Poetry

A Birch text is quite recognizable on the page – the cues are often quite short and spaced out, while the punctuation and capitalization do not follow standard grammatical rules. Because of the spatial layout and typographical unrest, the materiality of the linguistic material is emphasized. This insistence on the materiality of words has a long tradition in experimental poetry, ranging from George Herbert’s figure poem “Easter Wings” to Stéphane Mallarmé’s graphic poem “Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard” to Eugen Gomringer’s concrete poetry in *konstellationen*, a poetic genre which, according to Rosemarie Waldrop, “makes the sound and shape of words its explicit field of investigation. Concrete poetry is *about* words” (141). In other words, a Birch text shifts the reader’s attention from the mere semantic value of the sentences to the perception of the words on the page – it is a synaesthetic experience that leads to an exploration of the sign. In *Modern Visual Poetry* (2001), Willard Bohn lists three principles at the heart of concrete poetry: condensation, combination, and spatialization (235). It can be argued that Birch’s use of blank space, reconfiguration of the line, and use of contiguous text blocks bear similitudes with these three tenets of concrete poetry.

First, it should be made clear that the use of white space is not specific to concrete poetry but a key element of poetry (Bill Griffiths, Geraldine Monk...) and drama (Martin Crimp, debbie tucker green...). For instance, Glyn Maxwell, in *On Poetry*, suggests that poetry is the result of a fight of sort between “the White” (the page, silence) and “the Black” (the poet, words) (9–52), while Tony Harrison wages war against “the silence round all poetry” in “On Not Being Milton” (122). In Birch, white space is a figuration of all the silencing processes language has to fight against to be heard.

The first scene of *[BLANK]*, a play dealing with the dire consequences of maternal imprisonment on families, provides a good example of the use of white space. The scene is between two children, A and B, who are left unnamed, age-

less, with no indication as to their relationship, so that directors and their cast can give their own interpretation of the conversation.

A: Mum

B: Nope.

A: .

Where is

B: Don't know.

A: .

Have you seen

B: Nope.

A: .

Has she

B: Nope.

.

A: What's that

B: Food

A: Not that

B: Ryvita to be

A: Not that

B: precise – how can you tell when Ryvita has gone off? (Birch, 2019, 1)

The white space is part and parcel of the construction of meaning in the scene. Only a very few cues reach the right margin, most lines being limited to one word, and being repeated, especially when they contain a negative form (“Nope”, “not that”), as if pointing at a stichomythic conversation. The white space is also found between the cues and materialised by a dot which marks a break. What is perceived here is that the scene will hinge on what is left unsaid, which is quite typical of how Birch constructs her scenes in *[BLANK]*: long silences with slight variations that end in some form of revelation, sometimes in a form of a longer uninterrupted speech. Here, the speech, a textual block of one page, comes after four pages of sparse conversation and is a desperate cry of B who explains there has been nothing to eat in the house for three days and that the Ryvita is the one remaining thing to cheat hunger. Rhythm is as verbal as it is visual.

A Birch text is also recognizable because of its use of typography – capital letters, full stops, slashes, dashes, brackets abound. This has been a quite a common trend in British drama for a few decades, and most playwrights since Edward Bond or Sarah Kane have been very specific about punctuation in particular and turned their system into an author's note that precedes the text as a way to assert authority over the voicing of the playtext on stage. Birch's author's notes in *Anatomy of a Suicide* reads:

/ Denotes the overlapping of speech.

Words in square brackets [...] are not spoken.

The absence of a full stop at the end of a line denotes a kind of interruption – the lines should run at speed.

The use of a full stop on a line on its own suggests a pause – whether this is a single beat or ten minutes depends on what feels right.

The spacing of the dialogue, the use of upper and lower case letters and the punctuation is all there to help the actor in terms of the pacing and the weight of their words.

The text has been ‘scored’ – I wrote this piece across the page, so it ought to be read as it is written. (Unpaginated)

Each marker indicates pace, rhythm and stress. Together, they form a “score”, the complete description of the actors’ voice movement, as if it were a choreographic notation.

All these typographical markers are used in the following excerpt from *We Want You to Watch* (2015), a play-cum-ballet about pornography choreographed by RashDash:

MAN	Look – my [family] will be worried
SISSY	Who will be worried
PIG	You seem to be sweating – is that a Cold Sweat
MAN	My – my – there will be People. People who who will be / worried
SISSY	/ Do you have a medical condition we ought to know about
PIG	Who will be worried
SISSY	Why don’t you tell us a bit about that woman you chopped up into little pieces and left in an orchard for that dog walker to find out
PIG	Why is it ALWAYS a dog walker it’s always a fucking dog walker
SISSY	He had to pull a piece of that woman’s Thigh out of his labrador’s mouth can you Imagine how upsetting that must have been, I mean he must have been picking pieces of flesh out of his dog’s teeth for days. (13)

While standard punctuation is absent from the text (the question mark at the end of questions, the full stop at the end of a complete sentence, the comma between clauses), and so are stage directions, the other typographical markers take over to show – instead of tell – how the characters should read their lines. This disrupts the conventionally established boundaries between the visual and the verbal, and by doing so, it explores the material nature of language and reconfigures the social interactions at stake. In a way, chopping MAN’s cues with dashes and slashes figures the actual chopping up of the woman’s body.

Birch goes even further than experimenting with phonetic writing through typography and space since her text blocks, especially in *Revolt. She Said. Revolt*

Again. and *Anatomy of a Suicide*, sometimes look like calligrams. The object these calligrammatic passages embody is the stage itself.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Naturally. I walk past
women all the time.
Course I am. – I've seen a woman
before. Round things.
Absolutely I support
the round ones. 100 %. – I'd need to See a
woman I think before
I said if I was one for
sure, I'd need to know
what it was exactly I
was supporting, but
essentially, yeah, sure – Yes, I'm a Human, so.
Yes. – I think I thought it was
something else.
SHUT THE FUCK UP. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – (throws a bucket of water
over herself and slaps
herself)
THIS FEELS
AMAZING.
GENUINELY
INCREDIBLE. I AM HAVING A
WONDERFUL TIME. – THIS FEELS
AMAZING
(Birch, <i>Revolt</i> 67) |
|---|--|

The two columns indicate two different storylines that are unfolding separately but simultaneously and may even intersect. For instance, “SHUT THE FUCK UP” may be an end to both playlets. More importantly, they represent two different scenic spaces. The blocks of words on the page are the first intimation of blocking on stage. This is just the prelude for what has turned into the key compositional principle in *Anatomy of a Suicide*: the playtext is divided into three textual blocks written across the page, each column corresponding to a specific space on stage (stage left, centre stage, stage right) where one of a generation of three women battles with suicidal drive (the grandmother, the mother, the daughter). The spacing of the words on the page is a representation of the staging of the narratives on stage.

While Birch's plays are often compared to experimental works such as Martin Crimp's 1997 *Attempts on her Life* and Sarah Kane's 1999 *4:48 Psychosis*, reading the scoring of the text and the collages of blocks in the light of concrete poetry allows to better understand the extent to which her style is scenic in its use of poetic devices. Her texts are about words, but more precisely words on stage. This is reminiscent of what Marianne Bouchardon calls “Théâtre-Poésie” (“Lim-

ites non-frontières”), a hybrid form that breaks down the barrier between the genres so as to initiate a reflection on what the dramatic form is. Yet, not only is metatheatrical key in Birch’s works but so is metalinguistics.

The Playtext and Metalinguistics

In spite of the omnipresence of white space on the page, silence is not the only way to deconstruct the language of patriarchy for Birch, and anybody who has seen a production of *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again.* knows how loud that play can be. Verbal jousts, infuriated misunderstandings and deadly hesitations are at the core of her dialogues. Incidentally, her characters often use sentences like “I don’t understand” – in *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again.*, the phrase is the first sentence of each scene in the first act and it is repeatedly used elsewhere too.¹ This expression, which is used in particular when in a foreign country or in other cases of miscommunication, immediately calls attention to the way things are said; it defamiliarizes language so as to make it the real object of the scene. Birch also uses a whole spectrum of linguistic tools or poetic devices, and she keeps on questioning their variations, their uses and misuses. Because she wants to find a language for revolution, a language for feminism, a language for performance, a language for female experience, she cannot use a standardized version of English and instead resorts to three linguistic features in particular to defamiliarize standard English – the catachresis, the holophrase, and markers of speech disfluency.

A catachresis is a figure of speech which “has lost most of its analogical force, has passed into general currency, and has ended up being included in the dictionary as a recognized use” (Leech 31). Seen as a necessity due to the lack of a better word, the catachresis is often coterminous with the dead metaphor. An example of such dead metaphor is the expression “the leg of a chair” that has been lexicalized – it is no longer seen as a metaphor. Yet, according to the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, it also “disrupts the reassurances and taxonomic ordering of resemblance, offering instead a world where semantics has lost its bearings, where the foreign and far away has collapsed in on the near and the neighborly” (211). A catachresis thus ranges from a sedimented expression to a poetic exploration of semantic links. As Birch fights against the sedimentation of language and the ideology that is present in set phrases, she resorts to such device. For instance, in the first scene of

1 A few examples can be found on pages 21, 30, 36, 42, 43, 46, 52, 53, 55.

Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again., a character, most likely a man, tells his partner, most likely a woman, “I want to make love to you”. She is clearly not interested and after taking issues with him on the preposition “to” – to which she prefers “with” – she turns his sexual language, the language of heteronormative male pleasure, against him:

- Then I am Screwing you
- And I am Spannering you
- I
- I am Completely Spannering you and I am Jumping you and Hiding you and Chomping down upon you
- Not what I
- I am Blanketing and Locking you and Draining The Life of you with my Massive Structured Beautifully built Almighty Vagina.
- .
- Alright? (Birch, *Revolt* 29)

The female speaker replaces the catachresis of home improvement for penetration with a metaphor from the same lexical field that tells about her experience as a woman, before reminding the male speaker that her genitals constitute an organ too and it is big and powerful, insinuating that his own organ is much smaller. This truculent verbal joust is in the present continuous and yet only language happens, and it is deconstructed and reconstructed to become a female tool for power.

In *La Révolution du langage poétique*, Julia Kristeva writes – “syntactic competence implies the constitution through concatenation of two syntagms, a nominal one and a verbal one, and their linear succession.”² Birch’s speakers often fail to show such syntactic skills as they mostly use noun clauses without a verb, which corresponds in linguistics to a holophrase. A holophrase is described as ante-predicative and it more often than not includes body language since the noun is conveyed through a word while the verbal element is expressed through voice, gesture, and attitude. Though it is a step in children’s acquisition of language, it is also deeply theatrical in nature. There are many noun clauses in Birch’s texts. Some of them are used as slogans, like “Hymens, Hymens for sale”, which appears nine times in *Revolt* (60–72), and is used ironically to show how women’s bodies are under male control and considered as a mere commodity on

2 “la compétence syntaxique suppose la constitution par concaténation de deux syntagmes, nominal et verbal, et leur enchaînement linéaire.” (My translation.)

the neoliberal market.³ Some of them are used to denote aphasia, that is to say the inability to formulate language due to trauma, as when Carol in *Anatomy of a Suicide* repeats the word “baby” over a hundred times before being able to pronounce the predicate: “we had a baby” (103), with its heart-rendering simple past. A narrateme, or part of a story, is contained in these words, that will be developed during the performance, on stage. Holophrases are specific markers of speech disfluency.

Markers of speech disfluency abound in Birch’s texts – there are language fillers (uh, erm, well), aposiopesis (when the sentence is left unfinished), epanorthosis (reformulation), broken and repaired sentences... The word “fuck”, which is probably used in every single scene in *[BLANK]*, also works as a marker of speech disfluency:

B S’rank. And Bizarre – have you ever seen her eat a Ryvita in your

A Not that I’m not asking about the fucking Ryvita what the fuck is that (2)

The contraction of “It is rank” into “S’rank” and the extensive use of the four-letter word point less at the profanity of the characters than at their incapacity to formulate their emotions in an articulate way.

Beside, some of Birch’s characters also develop stutters (“Let me pour you a a a a drink” and “Everyone Wants a ch ch ch – ch. A Chocolate bar” (Birch, *Revolt* 42)). And indeed Birch makes language stutter in the Deleuzian sense of the word. In “He Stuttered”, a chapter from *Critique et Clinique*, Deleuze speaks about how some writers make the language collide with itself, rendering it “affective and intensive”; it is a way to “minorize” the language, it pushes “language as a whole to its limit, to its outside, to its silence—this would be like the boom and the crash” (113). In other words, these markers destroy language, but they also recreate another one.

Paradoxically, the markers of speech disfluency also imprint a specific rhythm to the text. In her 2017 speech in Lille, Birch added that, when she re-drafts, she “write[s] the whole thing out again, because rhythm is so important, and changing an “it’s” for an “it is” has repercussions” (“La jeunesse au théâtre”).

This constant attention to the words, their meanings and the sounds they make, this incessant critique of logos and creation of a new grammar is one of the poetic features of Birch’s writing that is used to create a female soundscape.⁴ But one other means is to rewrite poetic genres and texts written by men to make heard a female version of the story.

³ For a reading of Birch’s feminist criticism of neoliberalism, read Clara Escoda.

⁴ See Maria Elisa Montironi’s article on the female soundscape in Birch’s *Ophelia’s Zimmer*.

The Poetic Canon

Indeed, while Birch writes herself into a female canon through adaptation (as with *Schatten: Eurydike Sagt d'Elfriede Jelinek* or *La Maladie de la Mort* de Marguerite Duras), she also writes back to the male poetic canon as with *Ophelia's Zimmer* after Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Three examples prove this: her rewriting of the pastoral and the blason and her use of the motif of the nightingale.

A green bower where one can hear birds chirp and feel a gentle breeze in the everlasting spring air. A nymph comes in, all innocent and pure, tries to resist the advances of a young shepherd who pushes on until he gets his way. That is the stuff pastorals are made on and the genre has been used to reflect on what we now call "rape culture" (see Shakespeare's "Venus and Adonis" in 1593 and Christopher Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* in 1598, but also Wordsworth's "Nutting" in 1798). From a *locus amoenus* where power relations are potentially detrimental to women to a political site where women can find their voices, the pastoral is definitely a genre for women to occupy.

In the third scene of *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again*, the female employee who wants her Mondays off and her life out of the rat chase describes her dream place in pastoral terms:

I want to walk my dogs more. I have inherited a house in the countryside that has a path that goes from my doorstep and leads through the garden that is just potatoes and then bluebells – when it is the right time for bluebells – and that path then leads to fields and keeps going through fields and past a brook and those fields, they back onto a little wood where there are larks and nightingales and I want to walk in that wood. With my dogs. On a Monday.
It's very beautiful. (36–37)

All the items of the pastoral are present: the dogs, the house in the countryside, the path, the gardens, the bluebells and the seasons, the brook, the wood, the birds. There is even the hint of manual labour with the words "potatoes" and "fields" in the anti-pastoral mode Terry Gifford describes in *The Pastoral*, that is to say a mode of writing that corrects the pastoral. The repetition of the items and the circularity of the passage mimic a self-enclosed world that needs no addition, especially not the addition of a man. The last three sentences, curt, sharp, show that the nymph owns the place and prospers there on her own terms, without any man around, but a dog, the way Diana the huntress would.

Another genre that is rewritten is the blason, a genre which extols the loved one's body parts one after the other. The first act of *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again*.

opens with a rewriting of the genre which consists in a real dismembering of the loved one's body that the speaker wants to turn into a cameo:

You are a Brilliant Bright Bright thing – do you have any idea what your shoulders, bare like that, do to me, do to my structure, to my insides – I want to make a brooch out of your hair and your pupils and your ribs – and I know that sounds fucking – but I want to pin that to my heart and let my blood drain I'm done it's You let's Everybody Out Now World I Am Gone (21).

The work on the blason could go unnoticed; yet, the vocabulary inherited from court love and Romantic poetry generates the generic decoding of the text. The Petrarchan idealised language is turned upside down by the use of words that detonate in their materiality (“ribs”) or even have unpalatable undertones (“let my blood drain”). Yet the text is not an anti-blason, in the sense that it would criticize the woman's body. On the contrary, while seemingly praising the woman's body, it triggers a reflection on the violence of the male language of love towards the female body.

The female body is constantly under male attack, especially in *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again*, which is fraught with poetic images that describe, inscribe, prescribe, the body. One such example is the nightingale, which is a recurrent motif in poetry. Ovid, in his *Metamorphosis*, tells the story of Philomela, whose brother-in-law raped her before cutting her tongue out so as to prevent her from speaking against him. With the help of her sister Procne, she exacts her gruesome revenge on her abuser by feeding him his son. Threatened to be killed, she prays and the gods turn her into a nightingale. Of course, the nightingale is also a symbol for the poet in Keats's Ode. In *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again*, the nightingale suggests an ominous sound in the background when the male character wants to impose his sexual desire on his partner; it is the pet name she imagines being given after she is proposed to (the passage ironically reworks a traditional marriage proposal as if it were tantamount to planting a bomb, the first step towards a terrorist attack); it is also a pastoral item the speaker dreams of; it is finally a symbol of a simpler time when the speaker was innocent. These images constitute a Deleuzian “ritournelle”: nightingales, bluebells, potatoes, watermelons come back over and over again and create a network of images that are constantly resemanticized, prompting the audience to stay alert.

To conclude, it can be said that reading Birch's playtext as if it were a poem and engaging with poetic traditions proves how much her “poetic” language is really a performative language. In the same vein as Beckett and Kane, but with a feminist twist, she launches an attack against logos, speech, thought, law, reason – for her, meaning is elsewhere, in silence, maybe. If discourse is a “man-made structure” then women need to find other means of expression. She experi-

ments with forms, using poetic forms while questioning the patriarchal discourse that underlies them. The speech modes she develops are always provisional, on the verge of being transformed, and that is what grants her the title of “feminist poet in the theatre”.

Now in 2003, Elisabeth Angel-Perez wrote:

the turn of the millenium gave birth to a revolutionary attempt to reactivate a verbal theatre, not of the witty or satirical sort (Stoppard and Hare excepted), but of the poetic sort: a theatre based on the necessity to create different, almost artaudian, missions for words (chosen for their ‘vibratory’ potential), a theatre emerging from the music of the signifiers, ultimately a theatre of voices. (3)

Birch shares the title of “feminist poet in the theatre” with quite a few other playwrights who resort to poetic devices to free themselves from realism, capitalism, neoliberalism and patriarchy – be it Clean Break’s many productions deconstructing the poetics of the cage, debbie tucker green’s vocal rhythms in *stoning mary* (2005), Kae Tempest’s blurred frontiers between drama and performance poetry in *Brand New Ancients* (2013), Caryl Churchill’s transformation of small talk into poetic monologues in *Escaped Alone* (2016) or Ella Hickson’s metatheatrical opening that draws the attention to drama as a linguistic creation in *Swive* (2019). The list is endless and transcends notions of race, sexuality, age, class, nation. Playwrights tap into the resources of poetry to make inaudible stories and unheard voices occupy the centre stage of our imagination and political consciousness.

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Déborah Prudhon

Alecky Blythe and “Headphone Verbatim”: a Study of *The Girlfriend Experience* (2008)

Abstract: Alecky Blythe is a central figure in the landscape of British verbatim theatre. In her plays, she has developed a particular technique of verbatim where the recording of people’s interviews is played to the actors via headphones during the performance. The actors do not learn their lines beforehand but repeat a beat behind the words they hear and imitate the real people’s voice, replicating their intonations, hesitations, accents, etc. Ventriloquism – an eminently theatrical concept – is thus explored in a radical way.

This chapter focuses on *The Girlfriend Experience* (2008), a play which welcomes the audience to the intimacy of a brothel and transforms the spectators into voyeurs – a concept related to the exposure of other people’s stories that is also examined. Basing the analysis on the published play script and on the original performance, I examine the relation that *The Girlfriend Experience* develops with the extra-theatrical world from a technical, dramaturgical and ethical perspective.

Introduction

ALECKY. I make documentary plays so the actors kind of portray the real-/life people.
JANE. / Is there – is there a word – is there a phrase for that?
ALECKY. Verbatim.
JANE. Verbatim. Right. (Blythe, *Little Revolution* 25)

The phrase “verbatim theatre” first appeared in Derek Paget’s article, “‘Verbatim Theatre’: Oral History and Documentary Techniques” in which he gives the following definition:

It is a form of theatre firmly predicated upon the taping and subsequent transcription of interviews with “ordinary” people, done in the context of research into a particular region, subject area, issue, event, or combination of these things. This primary source is then transformed into a text which is acted, usually by the performers who collected the material in the first place. (317)

Such a technique establishes a particular relation between the play thus created and the extra theatrical world from which it draws its material.

Alecky Blythe's work slightly differs from verbatim theatre as defined above as her own approach aims at performing the "ordinary" people's accounts on stage as "faithfully" as possible. Indeed, in her creative process, the interviews are not transcribed and "transformed into a text" but remain in their audio version. During the rehearsals and performances, the recording of people's interviews is played to the actors via headphones. The performers do not learn their lines but repeat a beat behind the words they hear and imitate the real people's voice, replicating their intonations, hesitations, accents, etc. Alecky Blythe developed this particular technique after attending Mark Wing-Davey's course "Drama Without Paper" at the Actors Centre in London¹. Following this, she put up her first play, *Come out Eli* (2003) and founded her company, Recorded Delivery, whose name "reflect[s] the performance style" (Blythe in Hammond and Steward 80). She now appears as a central figure in the landscape of British verbatim theatre and has authored many plays based on this device: *All the Right People Come Here* (2005), *Strawberry Fields* (2005), *The Days of All Days* (2005), *I Only Came Here for Six Months* (2005), *Cruising* (2006), *The Girlfriend Experience* (2008), *Do We Look Like Refugees?!* (2010), *Voices from the Mosque* as part of *Decade* (2011), the verbatim musical *London Road* (2011), *Where Have I Been All My Life?* (2012), *Friday Night Sex* (co-authored with Michael Wynne, 2013), *Little Revolution* (2014) and her latest play, *Our Generation* (2022).

This piece focuses on *The Girlfriend Experience*, a play which welcomes the audience to the intimacy of a brothel² and problematically transforms the spectators into voyeurs – a concept related to the exposure of other people's stories that will be explored later on. The play is a chamber piece divided into six scenes punctuated by phone calls and the clients' coming and going. Over a 14 months' time period, the spectators follow the lives of Tessa, the owner of the place, and of three other women who work there – Poppy, Suzie and Amber. The spectator becomes the witness of their meetings with the clients, of their love affairs and of their personal reflexions on their job.

Basing the analysis on the published play script and on the original performance, this chapter examines the relation that *The Girlfriend Experience* develops with the extra-theatrical world from a technical, dramaturgical and ethical perspective. It questions the supposed "authenticity" related to the headphone

1 Mark Wing-Davey himself inherited this technique from the American actor and playwright Anna Deavere Smith.

2 Contemporary theatre takes up the theme of prostitution in its various forms – see for instance Lucy Kirkwood's *It Felt Empty When the Heart Went at First but It Is All Right Now* (2009), Cora Bissett's and Stef Smith's *RoadKill* (2010) or Permanently Visible's immersive play *Hula House* (2015).

verbatim technique and offers a reading of the play as a paradoxical celebration of theatricality.

“Technique”

One of the aims of Alecky Blythe’s plays is the explanation of the headphone verbatim technique to the audience. In *The Girlfriend Experience*, this is done through a prologue entitled “Technique”:

ALECKY (*voice-over*). I feel like I should explain –what I’m doing with m-microphones an’ stuff like that [...] I kindof make (*Beat.*) –um (*Beat.*) –they’re sortof documentary plays. (*Pause.*) But –I don’t –*film* anything (*Beat.*) – I just *record* –hours and hours of-of –audio. (*Pause.*) Um (*Beat.*) –and I –edit it (*Beat.*) –and then, um (*Beat.*) –those (*Beat.*) –so (*Beat.*) –people’s *real* words your real words –then become the words that the actors speak in the play –and they, they –*hear* –your voice –speaking –through earphones –and then they *copy* –exactly your intonation, accent [...] (5)

This passage corresponds to the explanation that Alecky Blythe gave to the interviewed women regarding the way her plays are created. Staging this moment allows her to reflexively introduce the recorded delivery “technique” to the audience in a *mise en abyme*. This presentation is coupled with a second process:

[A]t the beginning of the performance, the audience is able to hear the recorded material over the theatre’s PA at the same time as the actors are listening to it through their earphones. For the first few seconds, the recorded voices overlap with the actors’, before gradually fading out and leaving only the voices of the actors, who continue to hear it through their earphones. [...] Exposing the mechanics of the recorded delivery technique in this way seemed to be a relatively effective means of showing the audience what was going on. (Blythe in Hammond and Steward 99–100)

By letting the audience hear the original voices at the beginning of the play and by superimposing the voices of the performers over it, the playwright exposes the mechanism of the headphone verbatim to the spectators who can see for themselves how it works. It draws the attention to the actors’ coming into character in a palimpsest (layering of the voices) and sows the seeds of an ethical reflexion. Indeed, as Stuart Young observes in his piece “The Ethics of the Representation of the Real People and Their Stories in Verbatim Theatre”, “drawing attention to the devices of documentation and representation [...] alerts the spectator to the contingent scope for manipulation of subjects and their stories, and so may facilitate the spectator’s taking some ethical responsibility in engaging with the performance and representation of the Other” (38).

The last words of the real people that are heard on stage correspond to Tessa's line "It is all getting very real now!" (Blythe, *The Girlfriend Experience* 6). This declaration coincides paradoxically with the moment when the play really starts and when theatricality takes over. This calls attention to the reversal of the real / fictional order and suggests that what follows comes from a real source even though the audience can no longer hear the original recording. This process is used again at the very end of *The Girlfriend Experience*: the voice of the real person is once again superimposed over Tessa's before the final silence, as if it progressively left the actress's body that it had inhabited for the duration of the performance.

In addition to this initial setting of an interpretive frame for the audience, the fact that the headphones worn by the actresses remain visible acts as a reminder of the mechanics at work during the whole play and establishes some distance between the performers on stage and the real persons they embody: "Even as the actor purports to re-present the Other, the visible audio technology reminds the audience that she is in fact not the Other" (Young 37). Joe Hill-Gibbins, director of the original production, speaks of an "alienating effect". According to him, the visibility of the device counterbalances the casting to type of the play and indicates that what is performed on stage is "a recreation of a real thing":

If you are in *Come Out Eli*, and you are playing a Jamaican grandma, and you are a young white male, it is clear by casting against type that these are real people's words... so it has an alienating effect. [In *The Girlfriend Experience*] how do you create the alienation? We used to have these in-ear headphones, and one rehearsal the lighting designer came in and he couldn't see whether they were wearing them. I thought that that could ruin the whole thing. You have to have the alienation... If you make it clear that they are actors and this is a recreation, it becomes more real in sense because you become aware of the process and that there were real people out there saying these words. So we put the sound desk on stage, they declared the technique by putting the headphones onstage. With the set... we had it completely crudely done, with the bare wood. Absolutely saying to the audience this is not the real thing, but it is a recreation of a real thing. (Joe Hill-Gibbins in Cantrell 149)

The director's remarks can be called into question, however. Indeed, beyond the issue of "speaking for others" and that of appropriation that will be tackled later on, one can contest the fact that casting against type makes it obvious that what is said on stage is "real people's words". As Tom Cantrell accurately underlines, this suggests at most that the person saying these words on stage is not the original speaker but it does not mean that these words have been said by real people (Cantrell 149). What Joe Hill-Gibbins's statement reveals, however, is the utmost importance he attaches to the visibility of the headphones and the following par-

adox: it is by highlighting the artificiality and theatricality of the device that the relation of the play with the extra theatrical world is exposed.

“[P]laying real people in real situations”: Acting in Headphone Verbatim

The Girlfriend Experience establishes from the start a pact of apparent transparency with the spectators to help them navigate the performance. The recorded delivery technique shapes out the way they are going to interpret the play. Likewise, such a device impacts the acting. To what extent may the technique put in place and the fact of embodying real people redefine the actors’ role?

In Alecky Blythe’s plays, the actors appear as faithful messengers who become one with the person they embody (despite the visibility of the headphones). They do not only borrow their words but also their voice, imitating “the original accent, intonation, delivery and speech pattern with all the details” (Blythe, *Little Revolution* 5). The actor no longer works along the line of interpretation but of imitation: “What this does is cut out the actor’s interpretation of character and offers the audience a direct conduit to the witness” (Gardner, “Come Out Eli”). The actors seem to disappear to let the witness show through. They become vessels for (or usurpers of?) the other’s voice for the duration of the performance. Alecky Blythe refers to this effacement of the performers when she declares about the work of Anna Deavere Smith which inspired hers, “[b]y copying their speech-patterns with such precision, the real person behind the performance *shone through*.” (Blythe in Hammond and Steward 80, my italics). Because the work of the actors in such plays is based on the rigorous mimicking of the recorded voice, one could think that they stop *acting*, *performing* and “merely” *ventriloquize*.

Observing that publications on documentary theatre have tended to overlook the analysis of acting processes, Tom Cantrell interviewed the entire cast of four contemporary British verbatim plays – among which *The Girlfriend Experience* – for his book *Acting in Documentary Theatre*. This allowed him to uncover some of the actors’ processes and to “identify the ways in which they adapt current rehearsal and performance techniques and invent new strategies in the service of playing a real person” (Cantrell 1). While the headphone verbatim technique leaves seemingly no leeway to the actors, Debbie Chazen (Tessa), Esther Coles (Amber), Lu Corfield (Poppy), Beatie Edney (Suzie) and Alex Lowe (playing the roles of the punters) revealed that they took a few liberties with their acting. Despite the apparent rigidity of the device, they managed to find ways of rein-

vesting some performance in their otherwise faithful replications, for instance by pausing briefly – suspensions which were not in the recording – playing with the intention of a line or adding a gesture to create an effect. Debbie Chazen shares the following example: “You have to do their comic timing. Fortunately [Tessa] is funny without always knowing it. There is a lot you can do physically – a raised eyebrow at the end of a sentence” (Cantrell 146). This statement raises deep ethical issues. Not only does it reveal that the original meaning can be twisted by the acting, it also “suggests that the actors could comment on their characters to the audience, undermining the testimony by casting judgement on their subjects” (Cantrell 146). The ethical question of appropriating and judging the “real” persons is therefore not the exclusive responsibility of the playwright (explored later on); it also concerns the actors and, as will be shown, extends to the audience.

“[The actors] *hear* – your voice – speaking – through earphones”: the Primacy of the Voice

Wearing headphones establishes a particular connection between the actors and the person they embody. Indeed, the use of headphones implies intimacy, not only because the source of sound is physically close to the ear but also because the person wearing them is the only one who can hear what is played. In the case of headphone verbatim theatre, the recorded voice – which the audience cannot hear – directly enters the actor’s ear, as if the interviewed person *entered* the actor’s body to inhabit it³. The actor lets the other in. More than ventriloquism, there is something close to possession. One can therefore talk of a “spectral” device which produces what Stuart Young calls a “haunting effect”: “The nature of the mediation produces a curiously haunting effect, in which traces of the subject are uncannily both present and absent” (Young 37)⁴.

3 This brings to mind the image of the hermit crab moving into an empty shell used by Martin Crimp in his “Four Imaginary Characters”: “‘I’ve come to spend my life with you,’ he says. He goes on to explain that certain people, certain people like myself, are selected to be inhabited by writers. I’m not sure I like this word ‘inhabited’. ‘What do you mean?’ ‘Well,’ says the Writer, ‘we writers identify people who have nothing inside, who are dead inside – if you’ll pardon me saying so – and we move into him the way a hermit crab moves into an empty shell’” (Crimp viii).

4 It is also interesting to note that Richard Schechner describes the work of Anna Deavere Smith as a “shamanic invocation” (Schechner, “Anna Deavere Smith” 266).

This presence/absence paradigm is highlighted in the prologue of the play. Indeed, in the opening quoted earlier, one can notice the coexistence of two temporalities: the time of the interview, when Alecky talks to the "real" people in front of her ("your real words", "your voice", "your intonation, accent") and the time of the play to come ("the actors", "the play"), which had not been created at the time of the interview, but which the spectators are watching. In this second temporality, the "real" people – the interviewed girls and Alecky Blythe – have disappeared. Only their voices remain, carried by actresses, while Blythe's voice is disembodied and reduced to a voice-over. In this respect, the words chosen to explain the technique are revealing: the phrasing "they – hear – your voice – speaking" (not "they hear your voice" or "they hear you speaking") gives the impression of an independent entity. It is the voice itself which speaks, as if it were unrooted from its source of enunciation, as if the real person were stripped of their voice and became a spectral presence.

Playing with voice(s) is a recurring motif in Alecky Blythe's plays. *The Girlfriend Experience* is interspersed with phone calls (14 throughout the play). The telephone takes literally centre stage since it is the means for the clients to book their appointments. This object is particularly interesting as it underlines the acousmatic quality of the voice – audible but unseen. The spectators do not have access to the voice that is supposed to be on the other end of the line. They see the actress on the phone listening to a (fictional) voice that they cannot hear, in the same way that they can see the actors wearing headphones without being able to hear the recorded voice that is played.

In the first scene of the play, a client declares that he has been attracted by Tessa's voice over the phone, which leads to a comical interaction:

GOD'S GIFT. I actually booked to go there, and I phones here (*Beat.*) –just –her voic-[ce] – yes it was the *voice* that did it, ya know.

SUZIE. Your voice / that did it –

TESSA (*putting on a deep voice*). It was my voi-[ce] (*Beat.*) –it was my voice.

They all share a laugh.

My / voooice –

[...]

TESSA. Oh I'm gonna 'ave to change my voice, 'Ello dar-*lin'*/ -'ello

SUZIE. Nah, put yer French accent on –

TESSA. (*French accent*). 'Ello dar-*ling* – (24)

Tessa plays with her own voice which she gleefully modulates, trying on different inflections, tones and accents. The vocal organs of both the real person behind Tessa and the actress on stage become an instrument. Imitating another's voice is a recurrent theme in the play, which appears as a metatheatrical representa-

tion of what happens in headphone verbatim. In the following scene, Tessa imitates the voice of a client with whom she spoke over the phone:

She puts down the phone.

(Mimicking a high-pitched man's voice.) 'I rang earlier –

POPPY *laughs.*

– do you base your *(Beat.)* –do you base your prices on *(Beat.)* –services, or –or how long?

(Beat.) I said 'No everything's fuckin' half-hour.' *(Puts on his voice again.)* 'Oh-ooh *(Beat.)* –

oh I'm a bit confused –' *(Beat.)* Wha's ta be, *confused* about? (39)

This passage appears as a *mise en abyme* of ventriloquism: the actress imitates the “real” Tessa’s voice who herself imitates a client’s voice. But this excerpt also allows the audience to hear what was previously inaudible for them (the voice on the other end of the line). In the previous exchange, the spectators did not have access to the client’s voice but they heard what Tessa said, and those who paid close attention can notice a difference in the words that she reports. Indeed, her earlier line “Na-na-na-no, everything’s for half an hour” (39) becomes “‘No everything’s fuckin’ half-hour’”. By adding the word “fuckin’”, Tessa gives an account of herself (to paraphrase Judith Butler), writing her own self, giving herself a more authoritative voice. Because her voice is not cited exactly word for word, the audience can legitimately wonder if this distortion does not extend to the client’s words as well. Similarly, as the spectators do not have access to the recording, they cannot verify the accuracy of the imitation and can therefore go as far as question the technique itself:

[A]s the audience could not hear the audio, they could not judge the precision, or indeed be sure that the actors were hearing any voice at all. If anything, the spectator questions what the relationship might be between the actor and the headphones, and does not assume that this relationship is unproblematic or straightforward. (Cantrell 151)

These various elements thus highlight the limits of headphone verbatim theatre and its supposed authenticity.

Voice, which plays a central part in Alecky Blythe’s theatre, is also to be understood in a political sense. Indeed, verbatim theatre and politics are tightly linked. Not only has it “come to occupy an important political territory in Britain (especially in England) where contentious international and national issues are aired and interrogated” (Luckhurst, “Verbatim Theatre” 87 200), but, as Elisabeth Angel-Perez underlines, “verbatim consists in going beyond the concept of (political) representation (considered obsolete because forever insufficiently representative) and in *voicing* the people in the street”. (Angel-Perez 65, my ital-

ics). Verbatim theatre allows for marginal and dissident voices to be heard – voices that are absent from traditional media.

Alecky Blythe herself invokes the biased portrayal of prostitutes by the media when she explains the reasons that led her to write *The Girlfriend Experience*: “[The women at the parlour] broke the stereotype of working girls that is presented in the media” (1). This claim finds an echo in the play through Tessa’s voice:

You know w-what we’re *painted* as, what these people like Jerry (*Beat.*) –Jeremy Kyle (*Beat.*) –you were, you know, you say the word ‘prostitute’ ‘Oh so you’re *scum*’ –you know, ‘you’ve wasted your *like*, you’re –y’you know, you’re *noth-ing* [...] so getting’ *that across*, is maybe *worth*, going through the – (*Gasps, a nervous, excited sound.*) Woo-ooo cringe-factor. (*Pause. A heavy sigh.*) (57–58)

The women accepted to take part in Blythe’s project in order to send across a different image from the one painted in TV shows such as “The Jerry Springer Show” or “The Jeremy Kyle Show”, even though the price to pay is some discomfort (“cringe-factor”). The real person behind Tessa and the other women are hoping to gain dramaturgical recognition through the staging of their testimonies.

Alecky Blythe’s work – and, more broadly, verbatim theatre – seems to allow those concerned to speak for themselves and to create a truly polyphonic space on stage. But is it really the case? Are these different voices given a space to be heard or are they exploited for artistic purposes?

The Ethics of Verbatim Theatre

Using *real* people’s words in the creation of a play raises fundamental ethical questions. According to Stuart Young, “verbatim is an ideal site, not merely for examining the ethics of representation, but for foregrounding and playing out the responsibilities to the Other that are a necessary part of our negotiating our way in this increasingly globalised, interconnected world” (23). Staging real people entails a responsibility towards them. As verbatim playwright David Hare underlines: “If you stand up on a stage and represent somebody, you do have a duty to them to get it right and for them to be at peace with how they are represented” (Hare in National Theatre). This responsibility is all the more crucial as the people whose voice is heard in verbatim theatre often suffer from a lack of social visibility (Tomlin 122), which is the case of the women in *The Girlfriend Experience*. This ethical and political “duty” is incumbent upon both playwrights and directors, and actors who embody these real people can suffer from what Mary Luckhurst calls “ethical stress” (“Ethical Stress”).

When a playwright takes ownership of a person's story and stages it⁵, the real person is inevitably turned into a character (Hammond and Steward 64). In this respect, Liz Tomlin denounces the risk of "[reducing] one person's reality to a dramatic representation" and of "[rewriting] the 'real' people in question [...] to fit the narrative of the artist" (129), especially in verbatim plays which fuse the testimonies with fictional material. But even in the case of Alecky Blythe's work, where the people are not "rewritten" as such since the testimonies are staged word for word, this risk does exist. Indeed, in the creative process, the playwright undertakes considerable editing, as she explains in detail in *Verbatim Verbatim*:

Although my plays are created from recorded life, the characters' words have been processed at so many different stages before they reach performance that by the time they are spoken in a theatre they have taken on a life of their own. [...] I am able to link fragments of material to form a continuous narrative. I'm always mindful of taking something so far out of context that it distorts the way in which the comment was originally intended, but it is not an easy task to cut fifty hours of material down to an hour, while maintaining one's integrity, and still to tell a good story with it. While cutting and splicing material does give it more impact, there is the danger that a character is whittled down in order to fit the story, rather than generating the story themselves. I am always faced with the same struggle between remaining faithful to the interview and creating a dramatic narrative. (Blythe in Hammond and Steward 94–95)

Alecky Blythe is aware of the ethical conundrum she faces when creating a verbatim piece and acknowledges the unavoidable "distortion" of the people's reality to meet the aesthetic and dramaturgical needs of the play. This happens for instance when the playwright tries to create a comical effect on stage, which sometimes turns the characters – and therefore the real people behind them – into objects of ridicule⁶. In *The Girlfriend Experience*, it is the case of the punters

5 This "ownership" would deserve further analysis. The playwrights use – exploit? – the people's stories to create their play and in this regard, Alecky Blythe's words in the introduction of *The Girlfriend Experience* are telling: "As soon as I met the women at the parlour I knew I wanted to make a play about them" (1). For a reflection on the ethical issue of appropriating other people's stories, see Linda Alcoff's "The Problem of Speaking for Others."

6 Some people observe that the Recorded Delivery technique itself can contribute to creating such an effect. Dan Rebellato thus declares that it "makes [him] laugh at how idiotic people often sound when you hear genuine ordinary speech reproduced on stage" (Rebellato) while Lyn Gardner, in her review of Recorded Delivery's first play, *Come Out Eli*, writes that it "makes people – whether absurdly posh or desperately inarticulate – just sound stupid, particularly when their testimonies are edited to sit side by side". Paradoxically, what is presented as a means to faithfully copy the extra-theatrical reality can be perceived as artificial. Contrary to its declared aim, this technique can belittle the people whose voice has been recorded.

who come to the brothel. Tom Cantrell sees in them the “source of ridicule” of the play (Cantrell 144). The men, all embodied by one actor in the original production, become “pathetic caricatures” on stage, as their nicknames underline: Dick-brain, Groper, Viagra Man and God’s Gift⁷. But the women happen to be also laughed at. At the beginning of the play, Tessa and Suzie talk about a lampshade bought in a cut-price chain store. This scene was received with contemptuous laughter on the part of the middle-class audience of the Royal Court theatre (Cantrell 146–147, Tomlin 129). Cantrell believes that this particular passage was included by Alecky Blythe to create a comic effect: “The comedy in the play was thus not always generated by the subjects themselves, but by the editing processes” (Cantrell 147).

“Organis[ing] the chaos”

In the fourth scene of the play, Tessa, who has moved in the parlour with her daughter, is surrounded by unpacked boxes: “*TESSA [...] does her best to organise the chaos*” (47). Like Tessa, Alecky Blythe and verbatim playwrights “organise the chaos” of the extra theatrical world. If everything that is said on stage is taken word for word from interviews, it has nevertheless been previously selected and reorganised to create a narrative:

The dramaturgy of the dramatic narrative thus clearly shaped the selection of material into a recognisable arc. [...] That these were presumably “real” journeys of the women involved is not in question, but the skill of the dramatic shaping of the piece, in order to make these journeys coherent and central to the narrative, placed an inevitably fixed and fictional frame around presumably more fluid and less coherent realities. (Tomlin 226–227)

The playwright places the real stories within a “fictional frame” and creates a “dramatic narrative” from the raw material. One example of the “coherent journeys” mentioned by Liz Tomlin is the way the women seem to have changed for the better by the end of the play. Indeed, scene 5 ends on Tessa refusing one client:

TESSA *shuts the door behind him*.
TESSA. Mm.

⁷ Tom Cantrell also underlines that the voice of these men has been recorded and used in the play without them knowing, which raises another ethical issue: “[T]he male clientele did not know that they were being recorded, and thus did not give their permission, and yet their testimony appeared in the production. Blythe recorded their conversations with the women covertly, capturing their words in the hallway of the brothel from inside the sitting room.” (Cantrell 144)

She comes back in.

Hee-hee-hee. Fuck off. He said "My God you have changed." I said "Yes I have." (*Beat.*) For the better I believe.

[...]

TESSA. Fuck you, you asshole. (*Beat.*) You're not worth it. (64)

By rearranging the chronological order of the recordings, Alecky Blythe impresses her own interpretation upon the events. Similarly, she is the one who decides where the story begins and where it ends. The closure of *The Girlfriend Experience* symbolically echoes the first scene, thus giving the play a sense of circularity. Indeed, Tessa describes the girls available for a client over the phone (73–74), echoing the words of Suzie who answered the phone in the first scene (14). This circularity decided by the author suggests a feeling of repetition and confinement which qualifies the overall positive trajectory of the play. Furthermore, the repetition of the same speech by two different characters emphasizes the circulation of the voice, which mirrors what happens on stage – actresses repeating the words and impersonating the voices of real people.

Alecky Blythe thus appears as the conductor of the numerous voices in the play – an invisible yet central figure. It is her words which open *The Girlfriend Experience*, a reminder that even though her voice is no longer heard in the rest of the play, she remains the author behind the work presented on stage.

Alecky Blythe's theatre may appear more "authentic" (as in *closer to reality*) than other types of theatre, but its relation with the extra theatrical world is intrinsically problematic. Staging words that have actually been uttered by real people does not ensure a direct access to reality; it gives the illusion of it. More than a token of authenticity, resorting to real people's accounts appears as a *strategy* of authentication.

One can even go further and question the initial assumption which equates testimonies and "truth" in verbatim theatre. Indeed, as Judith Butler underlines in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, "in the making of the story, I create myself in new form, instituting a narrative 'I' that is superadded to the 'I' whose past life I seek to tell" (39). As soon as someone recounts their story, they enter the territory of fiction. Furthermore, the stories that are collected by the playwright can be shaped by the person's awareness that they are being recorded and their desire to control their image, as the example of Tessa rewriting the conversation she had over the phone underlines.

In the play's prologue, as Alecky explains the principles of headphone verbatim theatre, Tessa draws a significant conclusion:

ALECKY (*voice-over*). Ant it's –it's a really weird, kindof very true –obviously *so so* true to *life*, kindof thing –

TESSA. So you 'ave to be careful what you *say* – (5)

The process of collecting one's words can thus inhibit their voice. Conversely, Alecky Blythe also let the women at the parlour record themselves while she was not there, but this other method raises another question: “To what extent did the subjects craft and manipulate material? [...] This means that the status and credibility of the testimony is much more problematic to ascertain” (Cantrell 143). Indeed, one can imagine that the women may have “created” some scenes for the recording, enacted some events that they had not recorded or deleted some passages. Verbatim theatre is structured by the fiction / reality paradigm, not only because real testimonies are put on stage, but also because these accounts are to some extent the product of self-fictionalisation.

The seemingly paradoxical inscription of real stories and testimonies within a theatrical frame can be read as a desire to play with the boundaries of theatre and its particularities, and to celebrate not so much reality as fiction and theatricality.

“[I]t's a stage”: Celebrating Theatricality

The Girlfriend Experience, like Alecky Blythe's other plays, explores many theatrical elements. First of all, the fragments of reality are organised in acts and scenes⁸, and the play starts with a prologue – yet another theatrical frame.

Furthermore, *The Girlfriend Experience* stages the paradigm person / persona which can be considered as a *mise en abyme* of theatricality and of the craft of acting – impersonating (that is to say lending one's body and voice to) someone else. The women of the parlour, for instance, portray their work as prostitutes as a theatre role:

TESSA. You become –an-other person. (*Beat.*) It's, like –

SUZIE. You, fundamentally, / but with a different layer –

TESSA. Yeah, a (*Beat.*) –yeah, yeah –it's a stage –(*Softly.*) It is a stage.⁹ (*Beat.*) And you go an' (*Whispers.*) –create. (17)

⁸ The organisation of the play in different scenes is made visible to the audience as the stage is plunged in the dark in-between each scene.

⁹ In the original production of the play, the actress pronounces these words while looking around her and showing the stage in a large hand gesture, thus highlighting the metatheatrical dimension of the cue.

This exchange recalls what is happening on stage: the actresses who embody Suzie and Tessa are this “layer” which covers the real person and which the audience gets to see. Not only does Tessa evoke the “stage” on which she “create[s]”, she also mentions what she perceives as her work as an “actress”: “I-I, I’m *not* – me, when I do it. (*Beat.*) I-it’s (*Beat.*) – actress Tessa, it’s (*Beat.*) – i-it makes me (*Beat.*) – be able to disappear (*Beat.*) – I said, “Because I don’t, like (*Beat.*) – the *real me*.”¹⁰ (73). This tension between “actress Tessa” and the “real” Tessa (“the *real me*”¹¹) as well as between the actress and the “real” person that she embodies echoes the “not-not me” concept which, according to Richard Schechner, characterises all theatrical performance: “All effective performance share this “not-not me” quality: Olivier is not Hamlet, but also he is not not Hamlet: his performance is between a denial of being another (= I am me) and a denial of not being another (= I am Hamlet).” (Schechner, *Between Theatre and Anthropology* 123).

Alecky Blythe’s selected fragments from the hours of recording can therefore be read as a celebration of theatricality and of the space of the stage. It is in this light that the importance given to doors in the play can be interpreted. Indeed, different doors – the front door and the doors of the two bedrooms – structure the scenic space. Because they embody the place of passage between stage and off-stage – the suggested continuity of the fictional world – they can be considered as a fundamentally theatrical element. In *The Girlfriend Experience*, the “real” door becomes on stage a theatrical device which orchestrates the characters’ comings and goings. When Suzie imagines the play that will be created from the interviews, doors are mentioned twice: “Then you’ll be able to hear off set, you’ll be able to hear a door, you’ll be able to hear the punter, you’ll be able to hear going into a bedroom and the door shutting” (5). This door that the spectator can “hear” (when a client rings at the front door or when the bedroom door is shut) delimits “off set” spaces, especially the two bedrooms that the members of the audience cannot see even though they can hear what happens there.

10 Tessa wanting to “disappear” behind the character she creates establishes a difference with a “real” actress. Furthermore, I would like to stress the fact that this comparison (prostitute/actress) only applies to the way some of these women refer to themselves in the play. Not all prostitutes perceive their work as such.

11 The words “real me” reappear later in the play, when Suzie mentions her breakup with her boyfriend: “he kinda fell in love with Suzie – he – didn’t fall in love with the real me [...] he kinda fell in love with Suzie – he didn’t fall in love with Stacey – the real me” (66). This is the first time that the spectators hear Suzie’s “real” name. They discover that the latter, like the names of the other characters in the play, is a stage name. But in this verbatim play, Stacey is not the name of the real person either, but yet another layer to protect the “real” Stacey.

Doors epitomize the theatrical paradigm of what is given to see on stage versus what is suggested (beyond the scene / beyond the seen). Throughout the play, the clients materialize through the front door and the doorbell, like the phone, punctuates the various scenes.

But the use of doors in *The Girlfriend Experience* also participates in placing the audience in the paradoxical position of voyeurs – yet another ethical issue raised by the play.

“This is like *porn*, without the visuals”: Spectators as Paradoxical Voyeurs

Most verbatim plays use direct address. The original testimony – recorded during the interview – is recreated on stage and actors address the audience in the same way that the real person addressed the interviewer. Thus, what (sometimes) originally happened in a private and intimate setting is transposed to the public space of the stage:

The intimacy of the interview makes the audience feel as if the characters are talking to them directly, and the relationship I had with the interviewees is that which the audience experiences. However, the fact that these private moments have been transported into a public arena is what makes them all the more surprising, especially as they are re-enacted with the uncanny immediacy that the technique produces. (Blythe in Soans 98)

This “surprising” interlocking of the private sphere and of the stage placed under the scrutiny of the audience gives the spectator the opportunity to get access to the intimacy of the interviewee. The members of the public thus become voyeurs, that is to say people “who watch other people’s private lives” (Cambridge online dictionary). In *The Girlfriend Experience*, Alecky Blythe and the spectators push the door of the parlour and enter this hidden world. In the introduction of the play script, the playwright thanks “the women at the parlour who let [her] into their secret world” (1), an experience she wants to share with the audience: “Ideally, I want the audience in the theatre to experience what I experience – an intimate encounter with an otherwise secret world” (Blythe in Hammond and Steward 86). In order to do so, Alecky Blythe resorts to staging and dramatic devices.

Firstly, the direct address gives the spectators the impression that they are inside the room: “*The play is to be staged as if the audience were sitting in the room with the women. To this end, much of the dialogue is to be delivered as direct address to the audience*” (Blythe, *The Girlfriend Experience* 4). The members of

the public find themselves in the position occupied by the playwright when she originally conducted the interviews. Like her, they can only catch a glimpse of the clients who visit Tessa, Poppy, Suzie and Amber. Indeed, the stage is divided into two spaces – the sitting room and a partly hidden hallway: “*The action of the play takes place in the sitting room and the hallway. The view of the hallway is partly obscured. There are two bedrooms off the hallway*” (4). The punters are confined to this concealed space – they move from the hallway to the bedrooms but they don’t go into the sitting room. Alex Lowe, the actor who embodies all the male characters in the original production, comments:

I never go into the main body of the stage. I always appear in this corridor. It is deliberately obscured from some of the audience, just to get the feeling of what Alecky could see. She couldn’t quite see these guys, she certainly couldn’t go and have a good gawp, so she would only catch glimpses of these guys passing. (Lowe in Cantrell 147–148)

The spectators, like Alecky Blythe, observe the clients surreptitiously. Furthermore, the fact that the latter ignored they were being recorded can increase the voyeuristic pleasure experienced by the audience, as the director of the original production Joe Hill-Gibbins problematically suggests: “There is a voyeuristic thrill of listening to those men who don’t know they’re being recorded” (Hill-Gibbins in Cantrell 144). From the darkness of the auditorium, spectators spy on these men who don’t know they are being watched.

In this play which exhibits the daily life of four prostitutes, voyeurism also refers to its first meaning, that is to say “the activity of getting pleasure from secretly watching other people in sexual situations” (Cambridge online dictionary). Right from the first scene, the audience is placed in this position. Suzie and Tessa have left the stage to join clients in their respective bedrooms. At that point, the spectators, left “alone”, start to hear the sound of Tessa having sex with Viagra Man:

SUZIE leaves him in the bedroom and enters the sitting room. She hides away the money he has just paid her in her suitcase and picks up her toiletry bag.

(Whispering.) Okay. (Pause.) We need to switch this on (Beat.) –it now goes to answerphone. Okay?

She exits to the bedroom.

Pause.

We can hear Westlife playing on the television in the background. The phone starts to ring. A beep as the answerphone picks up.

TESSA (voice on the answerphone). Hello, we are here, we’re just a little busy and can’t get to the phone right now (Beat.) –please try again. Thank you very much –ba-bye!

Another beep.

TESSA (off). Yeah –o-oh-oh-oh –I’m –coming –coming coming (Growls.) coming (Beat.) –

(Grunts.)
 VIAGRA MAN, *off*, grunts.
 (Off.) O-ah –ah – (20)

The phone ringing reinforces the audience’s awareness that they have been left “alone” – the stage has been deserted, no one will answer it. But this ringing also reminds the spectators of their status: like voyeurs, they are a silent presence hidden in the shadows witnessing events without being able to intervene (as such, spectators cannot answer the phone). These moments, which can make some members of the audience ill at ease, punctuate the play:

We hear TESSA orgasming.
Beat. We hear TESSA giggling inside the bedroom.
 [...]
 TESSA laughs. A playful slap is heard. (45)

In *The Girlfriend Experience*, voyeurism is paradoxically based more on hearing than on sight, as if the audience were eavesdropping:

SUZIE. Then you’ll be able to hear off set, you’ll be able to hear a door, you’ll be able to hear the punter, you’ll be able to hear going into a bedroom and the door shutting, so then where they’re talking people look at the telly and the audience is out there. (*Beat.*) (5)

The verb “hear”, which appears throughout the play, saturates this prophetic passage in which Suzie lists all the elements that the spectators will be able to hear but not see. This verbatim play thus turns the audience into paradoxical voyeurs-eavesdroppers and raises yet another ethical question. Indeed, we can legitimately wonder whether *The Girlfriend Experience* allows the spectators to come to an increased understanding of these women’s world and to a sense of political awareness, or if the play relies mainly on providing a “voyeuristic thrill”.

I would argue that if this risk exists, it opens nonetheless a space for an ethical reflection regarding our responsibility as audience members. The moments when we might experience feelings of unease invite us to question what it means to be a spectator and what we choose to see as such.

Conclusion

In *The Girlfriend Experience*, the verbatim technique serves a subject both intimate and political. This approach distinguishes the play from other performan-

ces which tackle the subject of prostitution, albeit from a different perspective, such as Lucy Kirkwood's *It Felt Empty When the Heart Went at First but It Is All-right Now* (2009). The latter presents women victims of traffickers and if it takes its inspiration from real-life events, the characters are entirely fictitious. The play, which was staged by director Lucy Morrison as a promenade piece, "makes the audience complicit by turning [them] into voyeurs" (Gardner, "It Felt Empty"). However, the fictional nature of the show changes the perspective and the quality of this voyeurism. Contrarily to *The Girlfriend Experience*, Lucy Kirkwood's play cannot be accused of exploiting the stories of real people and of "serv[ing] its own interests rather than its subjects" (Gardner, "The Girlfriend Experience").

It could be argued that resorting to the original voice makes it more "authentic" and powerful politically. What the analysis of Alecky Blythe's play reveals, however, is that it poses deep ethical questions. By delegating their voice, the interviewed women run the risk of seeing it manipulated, distorted and even turned into ridicule. *The Girlfriend Experience* thus indirectly foregrounds the ethical responsibility of the playwright, director, actors and spectators towards the people whose voice is being used.

Rather than serving a clear political interest, the play appears as a celebration of theatricality and, more broadly, of literature, as it revolves around this essential question: "who speaks?" By relocating the extra-theatrical fragments to the stage while going through important editing processes and reinvesting theatrical features – including voyeurism which is an act closely associated with theatre (see Rodosthenous) – Alecky Blythe's play deconstructs or, as a matter of fact, questions the possible deconstruction of the binary opposition real / fictional and invites the audience to rethink the categories of fiction, reality, authenticity and truth.

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IV In Conversation with...

Feeling a Responsibility to Art: An Interview with Ella Hickson

Elisabeth Angel-Perez

Is writing for the stage always a new formal experience? Is this quest for a new form fun or is it a source of anxiety?

Ella Hickson

Yes, the formal preoccupation is really unavoidable these days. It's odd, I don't know why that is. Even *Swive* (2019) was in itself a sort of experiment because I was interested in history plays. It was an experiment in how to condense time, or the relationship between narrative arc and long periods of history. And even then, I was a bit frustrated because it felt somehow not innovative enough.

And also, it has to do with my relationship with theatre; I just want to keep it very tightly in conversation with contemporary culture.

One of the things I'm interested in at the moment is character, and the idea that we understand meaning through a buried subtext, and then a spoken text, that somehow give us psychological insight to character. It's so wildly old fashioned. People have just assumed characters operate in that way. I don't think the psychological truth of that really holds anymore, because I don't know if we are subtextual creatures in that way. Maybe that doesn't matter, because I suppose also, you have to constantly ask the question: Is theatre attempting to be a sort of simulacrum of reality? Or is it its own theatrical beast which requires a subtext in order to create dramatic tension? So there are two things. You're pushing the form the whole time to make it match reality, and then you're also questioning: Is it the theater's job to be matching reality? It's artistic schizophrenia.

Solange Ayache

You have wonderful female characters in your plays. Apart from *Boys* (2012), which obviously focuses on this community of young adults, all your plays concentrate on female characters fighting for the right to be what they are. In *The*

Note: This interview is a transcription by Elise Rale of a conversation held online on 11 December 2020 during the Sorbonne University, VALE and Initiative Theatre conference "The New Wave of Women British Playwrights. Experimenting with Forms". The Q&A was led by Elisabeth Angel-Perez, Solange Ayache and Aloysia Rousseau. Many thanks to Vicky Angelaki, Rebecca Benzie, Andrew Burton, Kate Katafiasz and Lianna Mark for their insightful questions.

Authorized Kate Bane (2012), Kate, the protagonist, becomes Kate, the playwright, as she redrafts scenes that are not to her liking. I'm also thinking about your play for children *Wendy and Peter Pan* (2013), which relocates the center of J. M. Barrie's work and pushes Wendy to the foreground. And it's a very contemporary fight that Queen Elizabeth I wages in your history play *Swive*, that of trying to be a woman without being submitted to her natural body, and what's expected from it, that is a child. And finally, how not to mention Amy in *Oil* (2016), who is a sort of Mother Courage across the century, helping us focus on the individual within, and against the big fresco of economic domination, imperialism. You've given actors fantastic female roles as fighters. So my question is, do you think that this fight must go on? And how important is it for you to put female characters centre stage?

EH

If you're going to write a number of plays before you die, you might as well redress the balance of the canon as much as you can. It feels like a reasonable thing to do with your life. And I just think there are so many pieces of the theatrical canon, and so many pieces of history, that don't have that perspective on them. And it was actually really interesting, when I was writing *Oil*, I struggled quite a lot, because I was very clear on which pieces of the history of oil I wanted to talk about. But having a female protagonist and getting a female protagonist close enough to those particular moments in history – and she wasn't always to be a secretary or a waitress! – was hard work. There were moments when I thought I was just going to do it in a magic realist way: she's the head of the oil company for the Libyan revolution, which is a stretch! It's 1972 I think, and she's in Hampstead running an oil company. My dad worked in the oil industry his whole life, and I said to him: is there any way that women then could have been in that place? And he was like, literally just the secretaries, and no one else. So that was definitely a bend.

Yet what I'm writing at the moment is about a male protagonist. And it does feel funny, because I think the last time, it was in *Wendy and Peter Pan* or *Boys*. It felt very natural. It's like a development. And I feel a bit nervous, actually, about having a male protagonist. I'm interested in loneliness, I suppose it's probably COVID, and a bunch of other stuff; I'm interested in how that plays out in gender, because I think it is different. It's usually something I'm trying to work out in myself, some sort of knot. And you always need a measure of distance. And I suddenly realised a female protagonist in a contemporary play, dealing with an issue that I'm interested in was too close. So, what is going to be the distancing factor if it's contemporary? And oddly, that felt like it needed to be a male protagonist. So often, you're trying to find ways to get it near enough and far

enough. But I like them all. All those girls. I miss lots of them. I really liked Amy. There's a sort of great girl gang of the actors that have played those parts over the years. It feels good.

SA

Could you tell us about how you came to write *The Writer* (2018)? And also, how important it was for you to experiment with form in this play in relation to its political message?

EH

The Writer was strange. First of all, I think it's been framed by its context, retrospectively, because it coincided with “#Metoo”, but I really did finish it before that. I was at the MacDowell Colony and I was living with thirty artists for eight weeks. You can feel things in those environments, because they're relatively secluded, and they're cut off from the world and you're living very intensely with lots of other artists. Zeitgeist sort of lives in the atmosphere in a slightly more vivid way. And so I completed the play and had been in conversation with two or three other female artists like a visual artist called Emily Hass and Liza Birkenmeier, who's a playwright. There was a kind of atmosphere that was kicking around. And I finished it and sent it in. And then the next day, I think it was Emily, who came to breakfast and was like: “Have you seen what's on the front page of the newspaper?” And Weinstein had broken the next morning, so it got swept into a moment about “me too”, that actually I'm not sure the play is about... I mean, it wasn't not about that. But really the incident that happened between the young playwright and the older commissioner was much more a metaphor for exploitation at large. The relationship of capitalism to art was embodied by the older male, artistic director and the younger female artist. There's an idealism and a kind of utopianism and integrity to young artists: art wrestles with the pragmatism and necessity and functionalism of the capitalist, embodied by the older male protagonist. And it really was that that I was looking at. And it's interesting how people think I only wrote the writer character in that play. No one ever assumed that I also kind of agree with the director position. And so it's been considered to be a sort of feminist polemic about the “me too” moment. And actually, it's me feeling very schizophrenic about art's relationship to capitalism. And it's quite even handed, like when she does her big, idealistic forest romp and then he comes back being like, “This is absurd, you can't run through the forest and expect people to buy tickets”. I mean, that is my voice as well, I am aware that spending eight weeks in the forest is not necessarily pragmatic... there is a financial pragmatism that is necessary to the theatre industry, as we are seeing to great effect right now. That theatre

does have to stand up for itself financially. And yet I believe that art needs to make a space where market forces don't attack it. Because its idealism is essential. The form of it was much more about that tussle, I think. And it was about the inescapability. So each scene is sort of eating itself, or commenting on the one that came before, with a sort of endless self-reflexive irony of that problem, I suppose.

SA

Could you tell us a bit about your sense of responsibility as a playwright? We quoted Sarah Kane earlier, and her refusal to see herself as having any responsibility as a woman writer. As a woman playwright yourself, do you feel part of a community? And do you feel that you have a responsibility, a role to play for the women out there that may be struggling to be heard?

EH

I think I feel a responsibility to art, to truth or to artistic integrity, as long as I can afford it. And women are part of that in as much as the whole negotiation for me is to alert people to the scale of the systems that oppress them. It sounds very grand, but I just mean it's a privilege not to have to take a movie gig where you have to play in to every cliché you know, to the old woman being almost invisible and the young woman being viable because she's sexy, and the narrative being about redemption through marriage and most of your activism is done really in saying no. And your ability to say no is a privilege that is based on financial security, or at least its choices, right? Do you want to go work in wherever for however long or do you want to take that movie gig? And I suppose I've just always seen my ability to say no as my greatest weapon, but there is a certain confidence and power that comes with accepting money. And there's a certain flavour of success that comes with being commercially successful, whatever that means. And that is increasingly available to women, especially in screen. And I am concerned, to say the least, that the agency and power that those women are getting is at the point of money and institutional power. It's a little bit kicking the ladder away as you go up. If it's about fame and money and institutional power, you sort of wonder what you've done to the system. I'm not sure that a bunch of millionaire women is that useful if the narratives that are having to be told, in order to get to those places, are still narratives that buoy up all of the old clichés, you know, "you've only got agency when you're young, and your agency is only connected to your sexual power". And once you're old, you're invisible... I got offered a film – I probably shouldn't say this – and the age range for the lead, for the woman, was 43 to 73. And you're just like, "that's not an age range. That's a third of somebody's life!"

And that is a visual black hole in screen. Because it's a visual medium. And we are taught culturally, that we don't want to look at women of that age. They're just not visually interesting to us. And that's completely mad. So, I'm much less interested in powerful women in the industry, if they're still only there because they're hot, and doing something sexy. I think you've got to test what kind of power you have. So as I say, I don't feel I have a responsibility to women, for women's sake, but I feel like I have a responsibility to alter the narrative to different shapes of narrative, and to re-address some of the social blind spots that exist.

SA

We talked about your role as a female playwright but I was also wondering about your directing. You've directed the first production of *Precious Little Talent* (2009) and *Hot Mess* (2010). How was it for you to direct your own plays? And then when you're not directing, what relationship do you have with the director? Are you around and about? Or do you tend to give away your text and just see what happens once the production is on?

EH

I wrote, produced and directed the early plays. And I found the sense of collaboration in directing them really, really thrilling. I suppose I'm quite savage about spending time at the point that interests me most. Because also I just want to be pushing at what I'm capable of all the time. Finding that limit is really where I'm most interested in being. And mostly that limit is on the page because it's always in the formal invention. When that formal thing has a physical implication, I'm then very involved in the show. *Anna* (2019), for example, is written as a kind of five column ballet on the page, but then how on earth were we going to turn that into a sort of dramatic netball game? The system of that wasn't flawless; the page to stage on that was complicated. So for that I was in the room a lot of the time. For *Swive*, I was really interested in condensing historical time. But I had worked out what that was by week two rehearsals. I'm in the process for as long as I haven't solved whatever is unsolved to me, whatever I'm trying to work out. And then once I've realised that the play has solved it, then I go away. But I've had great directors that have been very collaborative and have let me do it. Mostly now I work with makers, we will make it because we're kind of all on board with the formal interrogation. And then we all solve it together. Maybe I'll direct again, one day. I read a young writer's play the other day, and I've never had this before, but I think he's really great. I was on a teaching course. And I thought it was really magic. And I had a real urge, "I'd quite like to direct this", and I've never had that feeling before.

Aloysia Rousseau

Coming back to *Anna*, could you please tell us more about your collaboration with Max and Ben Ringham and about your creative process and how this particular sound technique influenced your writing?

EH

They've done a lot with binaural sound over the years. They are incredible sound engineers, and they created shows. I went to see a show that's called *Ring*, which is completely in the dark, and you put headphones on and it kind of guides you through a soundscape. They had always felt that that work wasn't connected to a narrative. They were interested in activating that work in a narrative sense in a way that they thought they hadn't done. And so they came to me and they showed me their binaural situation, which is basically 360 sound. So you put on a pair of headphones, and somebody clicks and you really feel like it's behind you. It's an amazing thing that they have sort of forefronted. And I was just interested. I've been to a lot of headphone shows and felt that the headphones were decorative, unnecessary. I kept taking them off – why have these headphones on? And it was annoying me. Again, it was a point of rigor, I was just like, the sound isn't active in this conversation. They're using it, it's interesting, but it isn't making the case for its own form. And so when I listened to binaural sound for the first time, I just thought there was an intimacy to it. You had intimate access to an actor in the way that you might with a close-up camera. But because you're in a theatre, there's something very interesting about your ears having intimate access to a character, but your sight still having a wide, wide shot. And so first of all, I was interested in conversion, in how what comes into your ears changes the state of your brain. So, I was looking at a lot of the people that had gone and joined ISIS, and at how Hitler's speeches affected people, like just literally the sound, how sound can alter your political position. And we looked at interrogation and interrogation techniques. So I was fascinated by all of that. And then the Ringlems are from Germany, and I'd lived in Berlin for six months. I had this moment in Berlin, where I sat on the tube and there was a woman opposite me who must have been in her 80s and I'd just read Marta Hillers' *A Woman in Berlin*. I thought: "You have lived through the Third Reich and then into communism, and then into Nike stores and capitalism in one lifetime". In England we're so convinced that our political system and our economic system is what it is, and will always be. Communism feels like an idea that's very far away. And I was just very interested in a country or in a person that had had to go through three huge political shifts and probably felt that like: "Yeah, communism or capitalism, and then what's next?" What comes into your ears can alter your ideology. And then also the intimacy was afforded to you as an audi-

ence member. And somehow it was the relationship between those two things that we sort of all drilled into, and ended up with *Anna*.

AR

One thing that we can say is that the play is not the same for the audience members who hear exclusively what Anna hears, and for the readers, who have access to all three layers of dialogue: what Anna hears, what she partially hears, and when she does not hear. Is this something that you had in mind when writing the play, and more particularly when writing the dialogues that the audience does not have access to?

EH

I'm interested in theatre existing so much as a live act that there are bits that you don't see, as an audience member, but they still exist. I think that the idea that theatre doesn't just exist in the reception of it in the audience, that there is a piece of theatre going on that you can't see, somehow heightens the reality. It gives more power to the theatrical world. It makes it more real, because there's a bit of it that you don't have access to. So, it diminishes the kind of colonial power of the audience. It sort of goes "this country is bigger than you think it is". And there are bits of this country that you can't get to. And isn't that somehow exciting as an audience? It's like this hasn't just been made for me, this exists and has been made. And I'm being allowed to look at a little bit of it.

When you're making a film, for example, you're looking at a particular piece of the set, but there's quite a lot of the set that exists that you don't look at. And that piece of the world that exists that you're not looking at as the audience member is what makes it real. Let's pretend we're talking about *Lord of the Rings*. If you build the whole set of Hobbitland – let's call it Hobbitland – and you only look at one of the houses, there's something really intellectually, and narratively interesting to me about all of the Hobbitland that has been built that doesn't get filmed. Because what is that stuff? That is like a fantasy land that somebody has built in the world for no one to look at. And therefore, its narrative reality is higher than the bits that are being looked at. I know that sounds so mad and vague, but I think that's what it is. And that's it for some reason in *Anna*. There's something wildly exciting about loads of theatre going on that you've got no access to. It is happening behind the door, and no one can see it. And what is it? What is it that isn't reality? This sort of liminal Neverland interests me. I think it's something to do with the internet as well. We've grown up in a world where you see a bit of something that you know is far bigger than you could conceive of, and somehow, we've got used to that. We know there are lands out there that we don't know and haven't seen. But we only get a little.

EAP

Can I just jump in and ask about the way you write the fragments that you know will only be accessible to the reader? Are these moments, forged and coined and invented differently than the ones the ones that you offer the spectator. My point is to try and find out if you have two strategies at work at the same time. That would be one strategy that would have to deal with the text that's made for the readers only. And of course, among the readers, there's the director, and of course, the world of the director wouldn't be the world of the director if you hadn't seen everything that he's seen, but is not going to show. Do you have two strategies at work at the same time as in *Anna*? Or is it something that you do in bulk?

EH

Anna is really specific. Vicki Mortimer, who designed it, built me a model box, and I did it like a football match. So I was on the pitch in the football match. This actually didn't turn out to be the case when we built it, because of some stuff your ear does to naturally readjust for distance, but I had built it so that what was audible would be what was close to the protagonist and what was inaudible would be far from the protagonist. And so I had to be in the middle of the football match with a spatial understanding of where everybody was at the same time as writing the dialogue, because it's the dialogue's audibility. And therefore, the narrative structure was based on the geographical layout of the characters. However, there are really big black holes in *Anna*, which I knew were there. The world I had control over in my mind was the world of necessary information. And then there were definitely pieces. In rehearsal, I had to write in some of the pieces of the world that were unnecessary information but also very necessary to each character. So there were twenty characters and often characters would come to me and be like "I talked for two minutes, and then I talked with somebody else for three minutes, five minutes later, but what am I doing in the middle?" And I'd be like "I don't know". I couldn't imagine... I couldn't pick it up. It's just easier in other stuff, isn't it? Because you're just in a room with two people. There's less offstage world, although actually what I'm building at the moment is about possible iterations. Imagine you have a scene and it's going along, and one person, an actor, then has a choice, they can respond like this, or they can respond like this. And if you take the secondary choice, that then creates a whole new possible scene. I'm trying to do that at the moment. That's endlessly infinite offstage possibilities.

EAP

Yes, a sort of fractal pattern of possibilities.

Question from the audience

Would this scenario that you're painting of the intimacy of audibility that isn't distanced by visibility have anything to do with the obscene space at the theatre of Dionysus, where you can only hear the death cries and distance collapses? Jacques Lacan says that the ears have no lids and sound sort of pours inside it. It goes from the exterior to the interior, almost like some sort of horrible penetrative thing. And the French call this the "hors champs", the out of field. Could you respond to that?

EH

I suppose you can do something with scale and scope and an imagined world. I always find that violence on stage is a complicated thing, because it's essentially clowning. You do know that it's not real. So the effect of it is complicated, because you're mimicking a very animal thing but you're also subliminally aware that it's not true. Whereas oddly, a love scene is possibly true. So audio shifts the register into something that feels a bit more feasible, it feels feasibly true. There's less to disbelieve in audio because you've got less information. I think for me, it's about intimacy, proximity. And if you put it in the dark, and you just have voice, there's a huge political act down there, which is that you are releasing female voice from the object looking restriction. And also you're releasing it from age, you're releasing it from physicality. There's an ambiguity to all of the visual signifiers that carry with it so much prejudice. When you just get pure voice, there's a cleanness or something.

Question from the audience

I was really interested by how you talked about *The Writer* as staging the incapability of the tussle and pointing out that all the characters are written by you. The Almeida did a revival of Crimp's *The Treatment*, just a year before *The Writer* was produced, in which there are issues going on with the entertainment industry and how the market of packaging experiences for consumption travesties those experiences. It has a very different affective feel when watching it to yours. I guess it was written in the 1990s, and it feels like an ironic game that exposes hypocrisy. Whereas when I watched your play, it felt that, by staging that tussle, you're attempting to gesture beyond it. I wondered: why stage that tussle in a sense, what does that mean to you?

EH

I think I was so aware of what the counter argument would be. In the march of feminism, you're so aware of the counter arguments all the time, they're deafening, right? So to say it and not acknowledge the counter arguments feels like idi-

otically naive. You're just like, what's the point in putting up the play when you can already write the review. So I was just like: write the play, then write the review, and then write the next bit of the play and then write the review on that bit of the play. And somehow there was a kind of closed shock to it, that if I could make clear all of the potential criticisms, then somehow it meant that I was at least aware of them, and it didn't allow anybody else in to criticize. And it was only because I was angry enough with the whole situation, and yet aware of all of the counter arguments to it, that I somehow needed to get all of it on stage. At the same time, there's sort of a cowardice to it as well as a bravery. It was heartfelt inasmuch as it was really a wrestle with my own doubt, to wonder if you could say anything without doubting it. And of course, you sort of can't. Your inner critic will have something to say about everything. But somehow at least engaging in that dance felt liberating. And also, to give utterance to hope without a counter argument? Is there an idealism or a utopia that can't be torn down? And that's what I think the play was reaching for. I find it infuriating the way that there are these really, wildly noisy moments of revolution, and then along comes the next one, and no one's done much of the implementing at a structural level to get any of it. It's just harder to implement than it is to criticize. I suppose. That's what the form of that play was sort of doing.

Question from the audience

About *Swive*, I'm thinking about that brilliant opening moment when the backdrop of the Sam Wanamaker was pulled away. Thinking about how you really play with history and time in the play, I wondered how that framing of the Sam Wanamaker and the Globe, and particularly that sort of heritage institution, shaped your process of writing the play and particularly thinking about forming the piece?

EH

Yeah, it's funny, the Globe. I was very concerned about the gift shop. Of all the theaters in London, history is a commodity in that place. And you feel the number of tourists, I mean really, there were nights on that show when busloads of tourists suddenly found themselves getting a piece of revisionist feminist history, which is like: what am I doing here? I was interested in kicking against the sort of commercialism of the space. And there's something in that that is forming content isn't there? We like to visit the Tower of London and we like to visit Hampton Court and we like to visit Buckingham Palace. And somehow that gives us a nice reassuring souvenir or a mug, or we buy a little ruler that tells us when all the kings were born, and that makes us feel solid and secure about the national narrative that we come from. I suppose I'm challenging a

lot of my growing up as well. I really love the Tudors, and a lot of why I wanted to do that piece of history was because I really loved my history teacher. I'm from the home counties like we've got such a comfortably, clean relationship with history. It's so uninterrogated because it's like National Trust. At GCSE, at an all-girls school we were being taught Henry VIII and nobody was pointing out that killing all your wives for the fact that they've cheated on you is a bit, potentially, misogynistic! And I just found that extraordinary. What is historically cozy enough carries a wild toxicity that we don't acknowledge because it's cozy. It's the same as *Wendy and Peter Pan*. When I first got that gig, I went away and read it. J. M. Barrie wrote that story about a young woman having to do all of the cleaning and cooking and putting up the curtains, in the summer that the suffragettes were in London. So on the front page of the news was Emily Pankhurst getting force fed, because she so believed in women having the right to vote. And he went away and wrote *Peter Pan*, about boys never having to grow up and women having to. And you just go: "That is nuts". And that is being read to all of the children of England, as a staple piece of narrative building in their consciousnesses, at an incredibly porous age. And a number of people came to see *Wendy and Peter Pan* and felt it was too political for children. "Please don't give feminism to my children. They're not old enough." Tinker Bell in the original story is meant to be chubby. And then you look what Disney's done to her. And then to farm it out to loads of children who then go into a shop and buy this doll... This whole thing is madness. And you're saying that mine has politics in it, but *that* doesn't?

Question from the audience

At the start of *Anna*, when she comes into the apartments, and it's quiet and she puts on the radio, and she says: "Is anyone there?"; to me, that was one of the closest moments to pure theatre visual – even in the dark – poetry that I've ever gotten. Did anything ever go technically wrong with *Anna* in the run at the Dorfman Theatre?

EH

Yes. "Did anything ever go technically right with *Anna*?" is the appropriate question for that show! I think the magic of that play has really to do with collaboration. We built every bit of that play as a team of five. And there was something in that opening moment that you are talking about when she does the earrings, and then she listens to the radio, which is part of the power of that collaboration: we're teaching you a new technology. And what went wrong? Her battery power ran out. So halfway through the play, she just goes completely silent. So we went to blackout. And then she went off and got her battery replaced and came back

on and people didn't seem to mind. They sort of thought it was part of the thing. And so that went wrong, and often just a lot of the spacing. The physicality of the ballet had to be bang on; people's movements were set to almost a metronome. Also the sound was being live mixed, so there were the two live elements of the football match going on, and a sound engineer live mixing every element of sound. Those things just often didn't work. And then the funniest thing was in one of the previews. There's a big secret in *Anna*, and at the end, everybody stands at the front with their cards, and it says "Keep us safe". And they got all the cards in the wrong order. It said something ridiculous. And everyone was looking at their cards to rearrange themselves and couldn't get in the right position. So we ended up having to put numbers on the back of the cards. So lots and lots went wrong.

But I think that's the joy of live theatre as well, that you see things go wrong.

Question from the audience

I just have a question which arose from your initial thoughts about whether theatre is trying to be a sort of simulacrum of reality. Do you think there's a connection in your mind between the hidden parts of theatre that you're drawn to, which I absolutely relate to as well, and what you were expressing earlier about our assumptions about the role of subtext in revealing character?

EH

Yes, they're both about the unseen, aren't they? As I've got older, I've just become less interested in subtext. Isn't there more emotional bravery in being straightforward and direct? I just feel like as a generation, we've got a bit lazy about the unspoken, and there's a kind of broadly tense, atmospheric, unspoken. And I just feel that it needs to be interrogated a bit more. This is probably just self-chastisement. I need to work harder. And I know I need to. The unseen in character and dialogue can feel like an excuse not to be rigorous. I guess the writer always has to ask, how much should I know – do I need to know.

The Gordian Knots of Theatre: An Interview with Lucy Kirkwood by Elisabeth Angel-Perez and Aloysia Rousseau

Elisabeth Angel-Perez and Aloysia Rousseau

Our collected volume is entitled “The New Wave of Women British Playwrights”, our wish not being to fit these highly varied dramaturgies within a specific category but rather to give pride of place to these powerfully innovative voices. We know that you do not wish to be categorized as a “female playwright” but would you say that there has been something going on these past years in the United Kingdom in terms of visibility for women playwrights?

Lucy Kirkwood

I think there has been generally a brilliant and much needed drive by most of the major theatres in London towards greater diversity in general, and I would say that most progress of this type has been made in the category of sex, yes. There remains a long way to go in terms of writers from the global majority, and I think working class writers are the hidden minority so often ignored, and we have a very long way to travel there, despite the hard work of theatres like the Royal Court, for example.

I think there remains a cultural bias towards the work of male playwrights and I don’t know how that can be addressed because it is ineffable – it’s not in quotas and data but in subjective judgments and unconscious bias and historic canonical ideas about what type of plays are “big” or “important” or “well crafted”. But there is so much work by women that is completely thrilling and evolving the form, so I don’t want to be too lugubrious about it.

EAP and AR

Most of your plays have a very strong narrative, a strong focus on storytelling. Plays such as *Chimerica* or *The Welkin* are visually striking but they are also real page-turners. Is that something that is important to you? Do you feel that theatre still has to do with telling a story to captivate an audience despite recent discussions around “postdramatic theatre”?

LK

I agree with you that both those plays have a very strong story engine to them, but I think much more in terms of what is the “live question” in any play. This question should act as a taut wire through the whole work that keeps an audience held. If the question goes slack, that’s when you lose an audience, but this is true for dramatic and “postdramatic” theatre. For example, we have the question of whether Godot will ever arrive which has sustained that play through countless productions and many decades, despite its lack of “story”. In Sarah Kane’s *Cleansed* we might say that question is “Can love survive holocaust?”. But in a play that is far more driven by story in a traditional sense, such as Dennis Kelly’s *After the End*, the question is “Is this woman safer inside this bunker or out of it?”.

But all great plays will have a compelling question at their heart, we’re just talking about the rhythm and speed at which they’re explored. I think in an era of box sets when many playwrights move from stage to screen and back again in their work, it’s not surprising that those more cinematic storytelling rhythms leach through, and I know that when I sense the work demands a large canvas (i.e. a running time of more than two hours), I consciously make those rhythms quite lively. That said, one only has to look to *The Crucible* to find a play as tightly plotted as a Netflix thriller, so it’s certainly not an entirely new trend.

EAP and AR

One of the major aspects of your plays is how the characters’ – and thus the audience members’ – moral compass is never clearly set. In *NSFW*, for example, we are never sure where our sympathies lie as there are no exemplary characters. In *Chimerica*, the end of the play undermines the certitudes that we may have had at the beginning of the play. In *The Children*, Rose’s motives may not be as selfless as they may first seem. Could you comment on that and tell us how important it is to you to maintain such moral relativism?

LK

Aside from the fact I find moral absolutism highly problematic and politically inert in most cases, I think many of my plays have a moral concern at their core: they are concerned with how to be good person in the world. And so it becomes even more imperative that the audience does not feel harangued by an ideologue, because what an unbearable night at the theatre that would be. I am not interested in a theatre that congratulates the Left wing for its already impeccable morals and lectures the Right on its failings (or the opposite). The entire gesture of *Chimerica* is to find ourselves complicit with a man who con-

ceives of himself as a Good Person, on the side of the angels, as he does increasingly appalling things.

We have the court-room and journalism to judge and describe things that can be couched in absolute terms. The theatre is vital as a space for much muddier, messier things, and we are derelict in our duty if we attempt to simplify them. The theatre is an arena for doubt, for shades of grey, for human fallibility, for the sometimes vast gulfs between what we intend and what we effect, for the Gordian knots that may never truly be untangled neatly, satisfyingly, but are and will always be a vast, vital, perhaps even the defining part of human experience.

EAP and AR

Both *small hours* and *it felt empty when the heart went at first but it's alright now* are immersive pieces. Did this form influence your writing or did your choice of site-specific theatre come afterward? Is that something you would like to explore again at some point?

LK

The former was conceived with Ed Hime and Katie Mitchell as an immersive experience from the beginning. With *it felt empty*, it wasn't conceived specifically as site specific, but the play was written in tandem with conversations with the director and dramaturg, Lucy Morrison, about the production, and those conversations were centred around an idea it would be site specific from fairly early on. So while I believe a studio production of that play is possible, there's a lot of site specific energy in its DNA. One problem we had to deal with was that the site intended for the show, a disused shop unit in a run-down shopping centre, fell through quite late in the day. We fought for it to remain outside of a conventional theatre as we were so wedded to the idea at this point, and were very lucky that the Arcola had this enormous warehouse space they were happy to give us. It was a vast blank canvas and Lucy and the designer Chloe Lamford did a wonderful job creating a labyrinthine Alice in Wonderland journey through the space.

EAP and AR

You tackle incredibly diverse subject matters from the Large Hadron Collider to sex trafficking and situate your characters in highly different eras and locations ranging from 18th century England to 1980s China or contemporary America. How much research and discussions with experts come into that? Is history or experienced reality the necessary ground for fiction? Is fiction the only mode possible in order to address certain problems and issues?

LK

I do a vast amount of research when I am writing about spheres that are unfamiliar to me, but what I always say is you have to do a swimming pool of research and then use a teaspoon of it. There's nothing more desolate and turgid in the theatre when it just feels like the playwright is showing off their homework. I also tell younger writers to be careful of research because it can turn into a means of procrastination. I don't believe realism is a necessary ground for fiction and I am saddened by how hostile the culture in the UK has become to non-realism. But if you are working in realism, it's of course necessary for the warp and weft of the thing to have the throb of the real and research is a crucial means of achieving that. Truth, in general, is always what you are seeking to distill I suppose, whether that's emotional truth or material truth, but I fervently believe this can be reached just as well, even better, by metaphorical non-realism as it can by finely researched realism.

EAP and AR

Mosquitoes is eerily visionary, especially when we think of Jenny's distrust of vaccines or of the Boson's monologue – at the beginning of act three – about “a virus spreading too fast for us to control” or “a bad day on the golf course for a sociopath with access to the nuclear codes”... Do you sometimes wonder about how your plays start having a life of their own and mirror or predict the society we live in?

LK

My plays all take a long time to write and you spend that time trying to take the temperature of the culture, it's inevitable that prevailing public anxieties and themes seep into them. This sometimes makes it seem like you can see the future but actually it's proof that the future is just a continuation of the present and the past, and events and behaviours that seem to come out of nowhere have actually been building to the point of inevitability for some time. For example, if you continue to destroy the natural world as we have done for so long, in the way that gives Luke such anxiety in *Mosquitoes*, at some point a virus from...let's say a bat, is very likely to make an ungovernable leap into humans...

EAP and AR

Children are everywhere in your plays. There are those who may or may not be expected (*Mosquitoes*, *The Welkin*), those who are mourned (*Mosquitoes*, *it felt empty when the heart went at first but it's alright now*), those who are unwanted but may very well be wanted after all (*Chimerica*) and those who may not be ours

but still deeply influence the choices we make (*The Children*). Do you feel that parenthood and generational conflicts are particularly fertile ground for fiction?

LK

I wrote many of those plays as a woman in her mid 20s to 30s so for obvious reasons, children have been on my mind for some time. I am actually hoping that now I have a daughter my obsession may wane a little! But yes, I think most of the enormous questions of our time are defined by generational rifts, or the actions of one generation impacting on another. There is also a universal quality to the relationship that's a useful foothold into abstract or alien scenarios – many people don't have children but all of us have been a child with some form of parental figure in our lives. So it immediately helps to humanize a brilliant physicist, for example, if you meet her not through her ground breaking algorithms, but through her difficult relationship with her teenage son. Suddenly she is like many of us rather than a rarified, elevated figure.

EAP and AR

Can you please tell us about *Maryland* and the incentive for this play which you have described as a “howl”?

LK

The play is informed by some of my own experiences which were brought to the surface during 2021 when, like so many of us in the UK, I was watching with horror as the stories of Nicole Smallman, Bibaa Henry, Sarah Everard and Sabina Nessa came to light. The play came from a desire to make a space to protest these atrocities, and a crucible to hold my abject horror and exhaustion that women are a) not safe on our streets and b) cannot rely on the forces of law and order to protect or even give their dead bodies the most basic levels of respect, and allow an audience to bring their own protest, their own horror, their own exhaustion, into that crucible, rather than sitting alone and atomized with it.

EAP and AR

What freedom do you give the stage director? Do you feel comfortable letting go of your work?

LK

It's important to me to accord the director all the freedom they want, so that their own artistry isn't hindered in anyway. But that is because I usually get to choose my director! And what I love about theatre is that for a first production at least

the playwright gets to be so closely involved in the gestation. I am writing this from a tech rehearsal where the director and I are whispering every few minutes about a rewrite, a graphic that isn't working, whether the lead actor's hair cut is quite right, whether the set can revolve quicker...so I certainly don't 'let go' during rehearsal, my inner control freak is well fed. But I get deep, deep pleasure from handing over guardianship of the work to the director and actors and creative team and watching all those wonderful people bring their enormous talents to what I have written. It's just the biggest thrill.

I find it hard to watch subsequent productions of my work not because they aren't of high quality but because at that point I will have sat through the play many many times and find I get bored with and annoyed by *myself*. By that point I will already be onto the next play, which will in itself be informed by a desire to better all the things I got wrong with the last one. To paraphrase Iris Murdoch, by first night, for me, every play is the wreck of a perfect idea.

EAP and AR

Do you go to the theatre? Who, among playwrights and stage directors, would you say has been an important influence on you?

LK

I sadly don't go to the theatre very much at this exact moment as I have a small child! But ordinarily yes, it's my favourite way to spend an evening. I am always inspired and in awe by the work of Caryl Churchill, Howard Barker, Martin Crimp, Annie Baker, Dennis Kelly, Debbie Tucker Green, Ali McDowall and Alice Birch, and I am very excited at the moment by the work of Miriam Batty, Jasmine Lee-Jones, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins and Benedict Lombe.

EAP and AR

All of your plays are politically committed. What is the function/mission of the theatre, if any?

LK

As much as I am concerned with the theatre as a place to test and explore ideas, I think it is ultimately a place of feeling not intellect. I find it hard to pronounce on its mission in an absolute way; I think this is probably different for every writer, and rightly so. But its urgent purpose is for me to remain a place where we turn off our phones and sit amongst other people to be exposed to other experiences, other feelings, other ways of being in or thinking about the world; to be challenged and tested and taken to uncomfortable places. When it works it is a place of profound and political empathy that backgrounds the "I" and fore-

grounds the “We” and demands not that we change there on the spot, necessarily, but that we acknowledge that it is at least possible for us to do so.

Notes on Contributors

Vicky Angelaki is Professor in English Literature at Mid Sweden University (Department of Humanities and Social Sciences). She was previously based in the United Kingdom (Birmingham City University; University of Birmingham; University of Reading). Major publications include the monographs *Martin Crimp's Power Plays: Intertextuality, Sexuality, Desire* (2022); *Theatre & Environment* (2019); *Social and Political Theatre in 21st-Century Britain: Staging Crisis* (2017); *The Plays of Martin Crimp: Making Theatre Strange* (2012) and the edited collection *Contemporary British Theatre: Breaking New Ground* (2013; 2016). She co-edits the series *Adaptation in Theatre and Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan, with Kara Reilly). She is currently working on the research project *Performing Interspaces: Social Fluidities in Contemporary Theatre*, funded by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (Sweden). The project will result in an open-access monograph, contracted with Palgrave Macmillan/Springer.

Elisabeth Angel-Perez is Professor of Contemporary British Literature and Drama at Sorbonne University in Paris. She has published extensively on modern and contemporary theatre. She has also translated many theoretical essays and plays by Howard Barker, Martin Crimp, Caryl Churchill, David Harrower, Lucy Kirkwood or Nick Payne, etc. Her new monograph is entitled *Le Théâtre de l'oblitération: essai sur la voix photogénique dans le théâtre britannique contemporain* (Sorbonne UP, 2022).

William C. Boles holds the Hugh F. and Jeannette G. McKean Chair in English at Rollins College (USA). He is the author of *The Argumentative Theatre of Joe Penhall* (2011) and *Understanding David Henry Hwang* (2013). He edited *After In-Yer-Face: Remnants of a Theatrical Revolution* (2020) and *Theater in a Post-Truth World: Text, Politics, and Performance* (2022). Along with Anja Hartl, he co-edits the Methuen Drama Agitations series and he currently serves as the director of the Comparative Drama Conference.

Hannah Greenstreet is Lecturer in Creative Writing: Stage and Screen at the University of Liverpool. She completed her DPhil at the University of Oxford in May 2021, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. Her doctoral thesis on 'Experiments with Realism in Contemporary Feminist Theatre in Britain' was joint winner of the Swapna Dev Memorial Prize. Her work has been published in *Studies in Theatre & Performance* and *Contemporary Theatre Review*. She is also a theatre critic and playwright.

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Ella Hickson is an award-winning playwright whose work has been performed throughout the UK and abroad. Her recent play *Anna*, a sonic collaboration with Ben and Max Ringham, opened at the National Theatre in Spring, 2019. Other theatre includes, *Swive* (2019) at The Globe, *The Writer* (2018), *Oil* (2016) at The Almeida Theatre, and *Wendy and Peter Pan* (2015) at The Royal Shakespeare Company. She is a member of the Royal Society of Literature,

a MacDowell Fellow and recipient of The Catherine Johnson Award. She is developing new work with The Old Vic, Tim Minchin and The National Theatre, and television projects with Kudos Productions and Warp Films.

Lucy Kirkwood is a multi-award-winning British playwright and screenwriter whose plays include: *Rapture* (Royal Court, 2022), *Maryland* (Royal Court, 2021), *The Welkin* (National Theatre, 2020); *Mosquitoes* (National Theatre, 2017); *The Children* (Royal Court Theatre, 2016); *Chimerica* (Almeida Theatre & West End, 2013; winner of the 2014 Olivier Award for Best New Play, the 2013 Evening Standard Best Play Award, the 2014 Critics' Circle Best New Play Award, and the Susan Smith Blackburn Award); *NSFW* (Royal Court, 2012); *small hours* (co-written with Ed Hime; Hampstead Theatre, 2011); *Beauty and the Beast* (with Katie Mitchell; National Theatre, 2010); *Bloody Wimmen*, as part of *Women, Power and Politics* (Tricycle Theatre, 2010); *it felt empty when the heart went at first but it is alright now* (Clean Break & Arcola Theatre, 2009; winner of the 2012 John Whiting Award); *Hedda* (Gate Theatre, London, 2008); and *Tinderbox* (Bush Theatre, 2008). Lucy Kirkwood is also a screenwriter, known for *Adult Material* (2020), *Chimerica* (2019) and *The Smoke* (2014).

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